FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

GRAO EN LINGUA E LITERATURA INGLESAS

GOTHIC FICTION AND GENDER IN MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN* (1818)

Alumna: Aitana Otero Torres

Titora: Laura Mª Lojo Rodríguez

Curso académico 2018-2019

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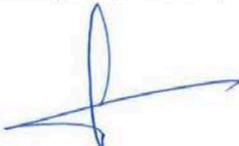
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SOLICITO a aprobación do seguinte título e resumo:

Título:

Gothic Fiction and Gender in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818)

Resumo:

The aim of this essay is to explore the extent to which Gothic conventions in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) enabled the writer to raise relevant issues pertaining to the articulation of gender in the novel. The Gothic genre and its fantastic nature often brings about discussions on questions particularly interesting for women, such as sexuality, gender and the body, among others, which would be more unlikely for women to be addressed in more realistic narratives. Departing from this premise, this dissertation will examine the novel's literary, scientific and cultural context through the lens of a feminist approach.

Structurally speaking, this dissertation will first offer a theoretical approach to *Frankenstein*'s reassessment of the Gothic tradition, in terms of what Ellen Moers has defined as "the Female Gothic" in her seminal work *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1985), to move on to a critical analysis of the novel itself, where special attention will be given to look into the condition of both men and women in a gendered construction of the world, and to Mary Shelley's particular appreciation of it.

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SRA. DECANA DA FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA (Presidenta da Comisión de Títulos de Grao)

A meus pais, por ser a terra das miñas raíces e loitar sempre por un ceo para as miñas ás.

The only thing you can do if you are trapped in a reflection is to invert the image

Juliet Mitchell

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Introduction

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* is a complex novel from a literary, social, cultural and psychological point of view. It was first published in 1818 and, from this date onwards, critics have tried to decode it through different perspectives and approaches by examining the novel's scientific, psychoanalytical, political, and, most recently, feminist repercussions, among others.

Feminist discourses on Shelley's novel include a wide variety of aspects which often overlap with some of the above-mentioned approaches to the text. For the purposes of this dissertation, *Frankenstein* will be examined through the lens of some relevant and, to my view, enlightening feminist examinations of Shelley's novel, which consider the complex intersections among gender and literary, social and cultural issues at stake in the text:

> Feminist critical interventions, notably, observed the absence of woman writers from reading lists, criticised the patriarchal assumptions and ideologies at work and promoted the cultural significance of representations of female experience and sexual difference in a range of texts by women. "Female Gothic" drew out particularities of women's experience, suffering and oppression under patriarchy and enabled a range of reinterpretations of women's gothic writing that explored, exposed and exploded the limitations of patriarchal representations of gender and sexuality. (Botting 2014, 16)

As Botting suggests, Gothic fiction was often used by women writers to covertly address issues such as marriage, femininity or sexuality, which were, in Mary Shelley's times, considered to be at odds with dominant, hegemonic principles which fuelled a particular construction of idealised femininity. From a personal point of view, and following Ellen Moers' disquisitions in her seminal work *Literary Women*, first published in 1976, a number of women writers dared transgress such conventions by questioning their socially-assigned role, which undoubtedly served as inspiration for subsequent generations of both women writers and readers across the world: "They [the great women writers] have taught me that everything

special to a woman's life, from its trivial to its grandest aspects, has been claimed for literature by writers of their sex […] (Moers 1986, xiii).

For this reason, the aim of this dissertation is to examine the cultural significance of Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the inspiring result of a woman's creative project, where she covertly projected her female anxieties by both drawing from and reassessing some major conventions of Gothic literature. My study, therefore, will revolve around two main concepts: genre and gender, and how the two intersect and relate to each other in the novel.

This aim is reflected in the structure of my dissertation, which is divided into two chapters: the first one, entitled "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Gothic Fiction: Discussing the Genre", offers a theoretical approach to the novel, including an overview of its literary, scientific and cultural context in order to understand the emergence of the Gothic genre. Here I will also address Shelley's particular understanding of the genre, which she significantly reassessed in terms of her own particular anxieties as a woman writer. This chapter is, as a result, largely informed by landmark studies on the major conventions and particularities of the Gothic, most notably, by Fred Botting's *Gothic*, first published in 1995.

The second chapter of this dissertation, entitled "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Female Gothic: A Gender Approach to the Novel", examines how the categories of gender and genre are mutually dependant ones and influence each other in Shelley's novel. To do so, I will be drawing from Ellen Moers' influential concept of "Female Gothic" as articulated in her landmark study *Literary Women*. Departing from that concept, I will focus on the central elements of the novel that reveal a gendered construction of the world, or, in other words, how society is built upon a gendered division of labour in terms of production —related to the public sphere and, as a result, to men— *versus* reproduction, connected to the private realm and, therefore, to women. In this dissertation I depart from the premise that the concept of gender

must be understood as a social construct which relates to our cultural identity and which determines our position in the world and, consequently, our appreciation of it. In this chapter, *Frankenstein* is interpreted in terms of an expression of female subjectivity encoded in Gothic patterns.

1. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Gothic Fiction: Discussing the Genre

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) is the well-known tale of a scientist who seeks to cross the boundaries between life and death. Aided by his unorthodox scientific training, Victor Frankenstein carries out an experiment to give life back to an inert being without balancing the possible moral and social consequences in an act of ethical irresponsibility. Shelley's narrative thus explores the psychological effects of Victor's scientific endeavours on the creator, the creature and society after the accomplishment of the project and abandonment of his creature, which he perceives as a monster.

Since its publication in 1818, Mary Shelley's fiction, and most notably *Frankenstein*, has become a worldwide cultural phenomenon. However, as time passed, the core issues of Shelley's narrative have been undervalued and its distinctive features are sometimes overlooked: according to the first entry of the term "Frankenstein" in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the notion is wrongly applied to that monster who is a terror to his or her creator and eventually destroys him. The entry dates back from 1838, and the etymology directly refers to Shelley's literary work, proving the extent to which *Frankenstein* was misunderstood from the very beginning. The main characters tend to be confused (the unnamed creature is often called by the creator's name) and the whole book is reduced in the popular imagination to a tale of a frightening monster, thus ignoring the novel's profound psychological and moral implications, as well as the circumstances that Shelley placed behind the fall of the creature.

Therefore, this chapter is meant to attest to the huge significance of *Frankenstein* as part of the Gothic tradition, but also to the ways in which Mary Shelley was already reassessing some major Gothic conventions by the time she wrote the novel. For this purpose, a general background concerning Gothic narratives will be provided, in order to understand the historical, social and political context which favoured the birth of the genre. To do so, the main

features of Gothic fiction will be discussed in order to show how the author complied with Gothic formal expectations in her novel while, at the same time, differed from them.

1.1. Birth of the Gothic Genre: Historical, Social and Political Context

The origins of Gothic fiction can be traced back to the last decades of the eighteenth century (Botting 2014). Although from our current perspective the Gothic seems to be a popular genre, its initial reception was controversial among readers and scholars, as illustrated in the following quote:

> Between 1790 and 1810 critics were almost univocal in their condemnation of what was seen as an unending torrent of popular trashy novels. Intensified by fears of radicalism and revolution, the challenge to aesthetic values was framed in terms of social transformation: virtue, propriety and domestic order were considered to be under threat […] Gothic productions never completely lost their earlier, negative connotations to become fully assimilated within the bounds of proper literature. (Botting 2014, 20-21)

Crucial questions arise from this statement, leading us to inquire the reasons why the genre was such a matter of contention and why Mary Shelley chose it to shape one of her major novels despite the dismissive connotations it already conveyed to readers in 1818.

In order to do so, it is necessary to bear in mind that the eighteenth century was widely acknowledged as the Age of Reason or Enlightenment, which favoured an empiricist approach to the world with the conviction that only reason could be the individual's governing force. Gothic literature began to emerge precisely one year after the French Revolution in 1789, thus signalling the connection between the genre and contemporary political events:

> Enlightened rationalism displaced religion as the authoritative mode of explaining the universe and altered conceptions of the relations between individuals and natural, supernatural and social worlds. Gothic words and their disturbing ambivalence can thus be seen as effects of fear and anxiety, as attempts to account for or deal with the uncertainty of these shifts. (Botting 2014, 22)

As claimed by Botting, Gothic fiction seems to appear as a response to the radically mutable and challenging atmosphere of that time. Traditional values were under ardent debate and accepted truths were being questioned. This fragmentation of the surrounding world had its impact on the aesthetics of artistic compositions, which mirrored an uncertain reality. In this sense, Gothic fiction was probably born as an alternative to those who found realist texts insufficient to express the many anxieties derived from these striking social transformations.

In contrast to the presumed light promised to mankind by the rationalist ideals of the Enlightenment, González Moreno states that "el siglo XVIII fue, a decir verdad, un siglo de las luces enamorado secretamente de las sombras" (2007, 19). In tune with Moreno, Botting also argues that the age of industrial prosperity and scientific advancement brought about new worries and delivered darkness and uncertainties in society, since the boundaries crossed by science radically altered the position of humanity in the natural world (2014, 13). In fact, Gothic literature often draws on such opposition between light and reason versus darkness, the equivalent to a non-rational dimension. However, and as Botting suggests, darkness allows the introspection of the soul and raises awareness about the potential for divinity in the mind of individuals (2014, 32).

The struggle of these opposite forces is present throughout *Frankenstein*: Victor Frankenstein, its protagonist, is an excessively ambitious scientist who plays God by endowing an abnormal and lifeless creature with life. He creates that being out of different parts stolen from human corpses, and his determination to cross the boundaries between life and death leads him to overstep the limits of morality. In that process Victor uses his intellect as a powerful but dangerous instrument to reach the supernatural and overcome both scientific knowledge and religion, only to abandon his creation after feeling disappointed with the results, in an act of utter irresponsibility.

Shelley's novel thus engages not only with moral issues, but also with contemporary scientific and religious debates, as Ellen Moers suggests: "At the time when literary Gothic was born, religious fears were on the wane, giving way to that vague paranoia of the modern spirit for which Gothic mechanisms seems to have provided welcome therapy" (1979, 78). The novel develops an exploration of the threats that science implied to religion, as well as those dilemmas which the excessive use of reason posed on society. *Frankenstein* is a testimony to the paranoia of the modern spirit, and its writing could have functioned as a therapy to the author to transform this general feeling of unrest into art, as stated by Lee Sterrenburg: "Viewed in its historical context, *Frankenstein* poses a question about literature and political ideology. As the historian T. J Clark suggests, works of art may draw upon surrounding ideological structures, without being reducible to them" (1979, 144).

1.2. Time and Space in the Novel

The influence of this social landscape of unrest and political upheaval is often acknowledged as central to Gothic texts. However, Mary Shelley's fiction is exceptional in her appreciation of it in her novel, since she chose to set the narrative in contemporary times, and also used well-known, familiar settings (Geneva, Ingolstadt or Scotland) for the plot, in detriment of the traditional Gothic preference for distant, exotic environments, in terms of both location and time:

> The past with which gothic writing engages and which it constructs is shaped by the changing times in which it is composed: the definition of Enlightenment and reason, it seems, requires a carefully constructed antithesis […] The interplay of light and dark, positive and negative, is evident in the conventions, settings, characters, devices and effects specific to gothic texts. Historical settings allow a movement from and back to a rational present […] The movement remains sensitive to other times and places and thus retains traces of instability where further disorientations, ambivalence and dislocations can arise. (Botting, 2014, 3)

As Botting argues, gothic narratives were meant to display a deep effect of detachment on the reader, making him or her feel lost and fully immersed in the depicted supernatural events and atmospheres. Nevertheless, *Frankenstein* was published as a contemporary work to its readers, and fully recognizable and familiar in terms of time and space. This is a distinctive feature of the novel, which has also the effect of presenting those transgressions of the laws of nature and of moral codes as closer, and therefore more threatening, to the reader, which was not the case of other Gothic narratives. On the one hand, by installing the supernatural in a reality which was close and familiar to the reader, the Gothic horror becomes psychologically more powerful and intense, making readers aware of the immediacy of the threat.

1.3. *Frankenstein*: A Frame Narrative of Doubles

Time and space are narrative instances closely connected to the form of the novel. *Frankenstein* has a complex structure based on a traditional structure known in literature as frame narratives. Following the definition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "a frame narrative is a unifying story within which one or more tales are related". In this case, there are three different narrators, all of them male, speaking in the first person. Concerning this arrangement of narrative voices, Kate Ellis observes that

> The structure of *Frankenstein*, with its three concentric narratives, imposes upon the linear unfolding of the plot the very sort of order that Mary Shelley is commenting on in the novel as a whole: one that separates "outer" and "inner", the masculine sphere of discovery and the feminine sphere of domesticity. Moreover, the sequence in which the reader encounters the three narrators gives the plot line a circular as well as a linear shape. (1979, 124)

This means that the voice of female characters in the novel is filtered by a male consciousness, which has obvious ideological repercussions regarding women's significance and visibility in early nineteenth-century society. The major protagonists of Shelley's novel

are all male, although with varying degrees in their implication in the narrated events. Whereas adventurer Robert Walton is a witness to the events and, despite his overt concomitance with Victor Frankenstein's ambitious nature, thus more objective and reliable to frame the narrative, Victor Frankenstein and the creature unfold their particular *Bildungsroman* from their birth to maturity.

1.3.1. Robert Walton

The first framing story is presented through Robert Walton's letters to his sister in England, Margaret Saville, who represents the silent reader's delegate in England. In his account, Walton explains to his sister his desperate, difficult and dangerous search for the North Pole as the captain of a ship. The letters are usually set in concrete places but dated in an unspecified year of the eighteenth century. The opening one, for instance, has the following indications: "To *Mrs.* SAVILLE, *England.*_St. Petersburgh._Dec. 11th 17—" (Shelley 2018, 7).

From this point onwards, Walton writes progressively from more distant shores as he is heading to a remote location in the North Pole he aspires to reach in the expedition. Apart from being the character who opens and closes the narrative, the seafarer can be read as an *alter ego* of the scientist: "temos un héroe solitario, empeñado nos seus descubrimentos científicos. Un alter ego do doutor Frankenstein" (Queizán 2010, 97). As González Moreno hints, "no hay límites para sus deseos como tampoco hay límites para su imaginación; ni siquiera la vida de su tripulación parece ser importante" (2007, 175). Therefore, Robert echoes Victor in the excessive ambition that had eventually led him to destruction, which is also a notable feature of Walton himself at the novel's opening, since he declares:

> I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man […] you cannot

contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation. (Shelley 2018, 7-8).

As the narrative continues, Walton unveils the narcissist aspirations that blind him to the point of endangering not only his own life, but that of his crew: "My life might have been passed in ease and luxury; but I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path" (Shelley 2018, 9). Moreover, both explorer and scientist share biographical coincidences, such as being self-educated as a result of a thirst of knowledge which traditional education could only partly satiate. The characters' dangerous ambition springs from obsessive readings about travels, in the case of Walton, and about natural science on Victor's side. Consequently, they choose to grow up excluded from society, developing a solitary and self-centred personality (González Moreno 2007, 175) which will progressively isolate them from those they love.

However, the identification between scientist and sailor is not the only existing correlation present in the novel: indeed, all characters and the relationships they maintain are arranged in such a way that these function as doubles and mirror images, as angels and devils, which eventually relates to the duality of the human nature and the way in which the Gothic expresses it (González Moreno 2007, 153).

Regarding his role as a narrator, Walton explains how Victor is rescued from the ice in poor health conditions, when he is close to the final destination of the expedition. Walton assists Frankenstein during the process of recovery, and the sympathy between the strangers increases gradually. It is precisely when Frankenstein perceives in the captain the same characteristics which had brought about devastation to his life that decides to warn him about the dangers of his pursuit, which sets the point of departure for the narration of Victor's own experience:

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

not know that the relation of my misfortunes will be useful to you, yet, if you are inclined, listen to my tale. I believe that the strange incidents connected with it will afford a view of nature, which may enlarge your faculties and misunderstanding. (Shelley 2018, 20)

1.3.2. Victor Frankenstein

Walton's narration is interrupted and eclipsed by Victor Frankenstein's *Bildungsroman*. The explorer feels extremely curious about the strangeness of Victor's situation, and abandons his own voice to become the passive hearer of Victor's tale. Victor begins the story of his life by providing a background of his origins in Geneva and, later, in Ingolstadt (Germany), where he goes to university to become a physician, after his own father. While his father influences Frankenstein, her mother has a very different role, in the words of Ellis: "[…] She remains dependent, as Elizabeth will be, on male energy and male provision. When Victor tells us 'My father directed our studies, and my mother partook of our enjoyments,' he unwittingly suggests much about Caroline's reduced sphere of action" (1979, 131).

In terms of time, the letters Victor receives are also dated in an unknown year of the eighteenth century. One of the letters is signed by Elizabeth, her half-sister, so in a certain way she is given a voice of her own within Victor's narration. However, her sphere of action is also reduced because in *Frankenstein* "the women are confined to the home; Elizabeth, for instance, is not permitted to travel with Victor and regretted that she had not the same opportunities of enlarging her experience and cultivating her understanding" (Mellor 1998, 3).

Concerning space, the radical change of setting from the North Pole to central Europe is significant, since the narration gets closer to the average English reader in Shelley's times. Once recounted his movement to Ingolstadt as a college student, Victor focuses on the details of the process of his experiments to create life *ex nihilo*. During the process, Victor becomes entirely devoted to his studies and secret project to the point of obsession. Nevertheless, after

the accomplishment of the enterprise the scientist explains the profound horror he experienced and how it troubled the course of his existence. The description of the creature is so negative that readers start to conceive it as a frightening monster. Victor's first impression towards the creature is the following one:

> How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate 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 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 back lips. […] I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole 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. (Shelley 2018, 45)

Hence, the creature is first introduced through a strong feeling of rejection and disappointment, as a mere product of transgression. In fact, usually combined with removed setting and time, transgression and monstrosity are crucial elements in Gothic texts:

> When inanimate objects like statues or portraits start to move, or when machines or corpses come alive, the contours of the world in which one defines oneself seem to have changed radically to suggest that, in horror, reality's frames have ceded to supernatural forces or to powers of hallucination or unconscious desire […] The dynamic process involved in gothic negativity can be seen in patterns of transgression, excess and monstrosity […] Monsters combine negative features that oppose (and define) norms, conventions and values. (Botting 2014, 8-9)

1.3.3. The Creature

Mary Shelley breaks the fixed Gothic pattern of transgression, excess and monstrosity when Victor's narration is suspended by the story of the creature's fall, placed just in the middle of the book, and rendered by the creature itself in the first person. This position within the whole fiction displays the creature's introspective speech as core to the novel. Unlike most Gothic

novels, Shelley gives a voice to her monster, and he uses his own words to explain the circumstances that turned him into a monster:

> In the remakes of "classic" gothic novels and movies, greater sympathy and stronger identification is unapologetically evinced for figures once condemned as incarnations of evil. Though the attractions of evil always lurked in the texts, the movement towards sympathy (beginning with Mary Shelley's humane depiction of her monster) underlines a major shift in perceptions of Gothic monstrosity from a horrifying sight of that which was most unbearable in a culture to a recognition and embrace of the monster as the image, the inner, often denied aspect, of who we, in a (post)modern western world, truly are: love all monsters, love your monster as yourself, becomes the new refrain. (Botting 2001, 3)

The importance of the monster is emphasized through the motif of the *Doppelgänger* or the double, and his speech is crucial to reveal him as an alter ego of his creator. There is an identification between creator and creature, as claimed by Levine and Knoepflmacher:

> Almost every critic of *Frankenstein* has noted that Victor and his Monster are doubles. The doubleness even enters some of the popular versions and is un-self-consciously accepted by everyone who casually calls the Monster "Frankenstein". The motif of the Doppelgänger was certainly in Mary's mind during the writing, as it was a part of the Gothic tradition in which she wrote. (1979, 14-15)

After the creature's forced withdrawal to the mountains as a result of the repulsion he produces in other human beings, he has a first encounter with Victor, which takes place in the icy mountains above Chamonix, where the creature requests to be heard by his creator. With respect to Walton and Frankenstein's narrations, we can observe how the author plays with the scenery in order to convey different messages, for the ice in *Frankenstein*, in words of Andrew Griffin, "blights and kills what was warm and blooming, seals up and freezes over even the most volcanic passions" (1979, 50). In fact, the creature chooses to dwell in the icy landscape "only when he loses all hope of companionship does he run, as it were, to the extremes: first to fire; next, in bitterness of heart, to cold and ice" (Griffin 1979, 51). Yet *Frankenstein* also starts with a drive to the polar regions. Walton's narrative, framing the book, is entirely Arctic, and Victor and the creature's stories are often located in the glaciers of Switzerland. The icy land

is for Walton an object of desire, for Victor it is an end and sometimes the background of his work in some way. Only for the monster is this environment a place of exile (Griffin 1979, 54).

The fact that the creature is forced to escape from humanity inhabiting an isolated spot suggests Peter Brooks' thesis that "Mary Shelley's Monster is in many respects an Enlightenment natural man, or noble savage" (1979, 209), defined by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as "an idealized concept of uncivilized man, who symbolizes the innate goodness of one not exposed to the corrupting influences of civilization". By engaging in contemporary enlightened debates on the inherently good nature of human beings that become corrupt in contact with society, the monster defends his initial good nature before becoming a social outcast, blaming humanity for this imposed exile:

> How can I move thee? Will no entreaties cause thee to turn a favourable eye upon thy creature, who implores thy goodness and compassion. Believe me, Frankenstein: I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity: but am I not alone, miserably alone? You, my creator, abhor me; what can I gather from your fellow-creatures, who owe me nothing? they spurn and hate me. The desert mountains and dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling to me, and the only one which man does not grudge. These bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow-beings. If the multitude of mankind knew of my existence, they would do as you do, and arm themselves for my destruction. (Shelley 2018, 91)

As we can see, although each narrator appears as the double of the previous one in many respects, their circumstances and positions within society are extremely different. While Robert and Victor deliberately choose to isolate themselves in pursuit of their ambitious objectives, the creature is repudiated and abandoned, being the first human being that is excluded by his own creator; that is, his father. Despite Frankenstein's obsessive search for knowledge and unlimited power over life and death, the physician feels overwhelmed by unexpected and uncontrollable emotions at the birth of what he considers a monster. After nearly two years of complete dedication to his project, Victor's reaction can be perceived as paradoxical and irrational, but it engages with Ellen Moers' description of the novel as a "distinctly woman's

mythmaking on the subject of birth, precisely because its emphasis is not upon what precedes

birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma after birth" (1979, 81).

2. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Female Gothic: A Gender Approach to the Novel

Female Gothic is a term famously coined by Ellen Moers in her seminal work *Literary Women,* first published in 1976, which she defined as "the work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (1986, 90). The aim of this chapter is to account for the importance of women's experience in connection with Gothic literature, as well as to probe the extent to which the novel attests to a gendered construction of the universe.

2.1. *Frankenstein* as a Birth Myth

A pattern for the so-called Female Gothic was set by Ann Radcliffe (1764 – 1823), in whose novels women protagonists were, at once, brave heroines and victims. However, Mary Shelley's fiction meant a reassessment of the literary "terror"— famously defined by Radcliffe as the feeling of dread and anticipation that precedes the horrifying experience in opposition to "horror", the feeling of revulsion which follows a threatening experience— thus de-emphasizing the presence of women characters as victims. Even though the presence of women is not highly significant in *Frankenstein,* it is probably one of the narratives that best reflects upon its author's gender. *Frankenstein* is a novel that entails a significant birth myth and may have been inspired by Shelley's own experience of motherhood (Moers 1979, 79). In this sense, it is important to bear in mind that Shelley's earliest experiences of motherhood are marked by the trauma of loss, as Moers remarks:

> Death and birth were thus as hideously intermixed in the life of Mary Shelley as in Frankenstein's "workshop of filthy creation." Who can read without shuddering, and without remembering her myth of the birth of a nameless monster, Mary's journal entry of March 19, 1815, which records the trauma of her loss, when she was seventeen, of her first baby, the little girl who did not live enough to be given a name. "Dream that my little baby came to life again,". Mary wrote; "that it had only been cold, and that we

rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Awake and find no baby. I think about the thing all day. Not in good spirits". (1979, 84)

Drawing on this theory, Knoepflmacher affirms that "Ellen Moers demonstrates the significance for this novel of the death of Mary Shelley's first (unnamed) 'female child' in 1815, [and] of the birth of the son she named after her father in 1816" and, regarding these biographical factors, he also declares that "I tend to read *Frankenstein* as a 'phantasmagoria of the nursery', a fantasy designed to relieve deep personal anxieties over birth and death and identity" (1979, 91-92).

In this sense, Shelley seems to verbalize normal reactions after the birth of a baby through Frankenstein's attitude towards the creature: fear, guilt and anxiety. But in our cultural background, happy maternal feelings seem more socially acceptable, such as the joy or sense of plenitude (Moers 1979, 81). In tune with Moers, Keith R. Swaney states that "nineteenth century society perceived the birth of a child as a miracle, since both the biological and emotional connections between the mother and child extended from pregnancy to birth. Conversely, Frankenstein rejects his own hideous creation" (2003, 54).

Nevertheless, Shelley was deprived of these emotional connections between mother and child, as they were broken at the moment of both her own birth (which provoked her mother's death) and the birth of her first daughter (who only survived a few days). Although nineteenth-century society imposed on women an idealized conception of motherhood, traumatic experiences often produced in them to develop a different perception of it. Such contradictory feelings and ambiguity may have favoured the genesis of the creature:

> El hecho de la maternidad ocupaba todos sus pensamientos en los meses que precedieron al hallazgo narrativo de su primera novela. Esperaba un nuevo hijo. Se sentía atemorizada. La consecuencia de la maternidad era la vida, pero, no siempre de modo indefectible. Para que ella viniese a este mundo, su madre, Mary Wollstonecraft, había tenido que morir. Su primera hija sólo sobrevivió unos días. Podía resultar macabro y hasta cruel, pero aquella desgracia le había mostrado que la frontera entre

una y otra experiencia, la vida y la muerte, era tan débil. Tal vez, bajo el influjo de aquella pérdida la criatura de Frankenstein había tomado el aspecto de un muerto resucitado, una momia de carne ajada, que balbuceaba indefensa como un niño recién nacido. (Vega Rodríguez 1999, 89)

The fact that the negative response to birth was —and continues to be— a cultural taboo could have motivated the author's treatment of the issue under Gothic conventions. The transformation of the trauma after birth into a Gothic phantasmagoria may have offered Shelley the possibility to freely convey her personal anxieties, especially by placing them in a world of "omnipresent fathers and absent mothers" (1979, 90) in words of Knoepflmacher. The implications of this affirmation reflect not only the enormous influence of Mary Shelley's biographical experience for the plot, but also a gendered conception of the book's reality, and presumably of nineteenth century culture by extension.

Concerning the absence of mothers in the novel as a projection of biographical events, Vega Rodríguez explains:

> Era inevitable, por lo tanto, que tal como había sucedido en su propia vida, la gran figura ausente de su relato fuese la madre. Por eso casi todos los personajes de su novela padecían la orfandad materna desde la infancia, Justine, Elizabeth, Frankenstein, Félix y Agatha. El monstruo, finalmente, había sido privado de la madre desde su concepción. Frankenstein había borrado de la realidad, y del sueño, una de las pocas certezas de la existencia humana. (1999, 89-90)

Taking this fragment into consideration, it can be concluded that even though *Frankenstein* can be interpreted as a birth myth that exposes the guilt and anxiety associated with the coming of a child, it also condemns the consequences of the usurpation of a role assigned by nature to women:

> The kind of family that Shelley is describing shapes us still: its most distinctive feature is that of the dominant yet absent father […] *Frankenstein* is indeed a birth myth, but one in which the parent who "brought death into the world, and all our woe" is not a woman but a man who has pushed the masculine prerogative past the limits of nature, creating life not through the female body but in a laboratory. (Ellis 1979, 142)

2.2. John Milton's Influence: *Paradise Lost*

The idea of omnipresent fathers is very complex and relevant in the narrative, especially from the point of view of the presentation of the creature as an "Adanic Monster", a term used by Knoepflmacher (1979, 89). The significance of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) as a powerful intertext in *Frankenstein* has been pointed by a large number of scholars, such as Gilbert and Gubar:

> It would be a mistake to underestimate the significance of *Frankenstein*'s title page, with its allusive subtitle ("The Modern Prometheus") and carefully pointed Miltonic epigraph ("Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay/To mould me man? Did I solicit thee/From darkness to promote me?"). (1984, 224)

The epigraph of the novel belongs, in fact, to a longer speech in *Paradise Lost* in which Adam rebels against the Spirit of Creation, as Knoepflmacher (1979, 89), among many others, has suggested. The novel's epigraph not only anticipates the creature's rage against the indifference and irresponsibility of his creator, but also emphasises Shelley's connection with her own father and his omnipresent nature, William Godwin (1756 – 1836), to whom the novel is dedicated, producing, therefore, an ironic effect which undermines the dedication itself. The parent-child bond between creator and creature that Shelley tried to evoke in the reader's mind is, therefore, a traumatic one characterised by a profound lack of affection. This pattern is repeated throughout the whole novel, as Knoepflmacher asserted:

> This contest between males divorced from female nurturance is framed by a series of forbidding fathers-the father whose "dying injunction" forbade Walton to embark on sea-faring life; Henry Clerval's father, who insists that his son be a merchant rather than a poet; the "inexorable" Russian father who tries to force his daughter into a union she abhors; the treacherous Turkish father who uses Safie to obtain his freedom yet issues the "tyrannical mandate" that she betray Felix. (1979, 104)

Both Shelley and the main characters of the novel only received their father's nurture, lacking the mere possibility of enjoying maternal affection. Unlike them, the monster knew no parental love at all, and his emotional intelligence is based on his observations of the surrounding world, most notably, of the De Lacey family, and the different readings that contribute to his self-education, among them, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which recalls Shelley's own upbringing. With respect to the reading of Milton's poem by the monster, Vega Rodríguez observes that:

> También comprendió el engendro la terrible injusticia que Frankenstein, su creador, había cometido con él. Las aguas del río le habían anunciado algo que el *Paraíso* de Milton acabó de revelarle, su monstruosa fealdad. […] El conocimiento le había arrancado la felicidad animal para introducirlo en la desgracia humana. (1999, 51)

Milton's story confirms the creature's belief that his monstrosity isolates him from humanity. Moreover, he realizes, after reading the manuscript in which Victor describes the progress of the experiment, that he was carefully and intendedly designed in the shape he possesses. As the quote above illustrates, the creature uses Milton's epic as a referent to judge his own creator. By comparing Frankenstein to God, the monster acquires a perception of the world, as mentioned by Vega Rodríguez, that makes him withdraw from his animal innocence and feel the suffering of abandonment. At the same time, he identifies and parallels himself with Adam, which reinforces González Moreno's thesis that all the characters in the novel function as doubles (2007, 153), even though Adam only appears in the fictional universe of *Paradise Lost*:

> But *Paradise Lost* excited different and far deeper emotions. […] It moved every feeling of wonder and awe, that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous […] God in pity made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of your's, more horrid from its very resemblance. Satan had its

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companions, fellow-devils, to admire and encourage him; but I am solitary and detested. (Shelley 2018, 121-122)

The reading of the epic poem and the scientist's manuscript not only makes the monster comprehend that his creator's abandonment (inspired by his monstrosity) is the ultimate reason for his deep solitude, but suggests the idea of a companionship to fill the parental void and thus confront the rejection from humanity:

> *Paradise Lost* incites a deep emotional conflict within the monster, in that he doubts his worth altogether […] Just as God rejected the fallen angel of Satan, Frankenstein scorns his own creation, yet even before the monster has the opportunity to develop. Frankenstein's diary confirms his creation's worthlessness; the monster has been abandoned and has nothing for which to live, except the possibility of a manufactured, unfulfilling companionship. (Swaney 2003, 59)

The creature explicitly mentions the absence of "an Eve" for him and takes from Adam's supplication to God the idea of requesting his own creator for a similar partner.

> Sometimes I allowed my thoughts, unchecked by reason, to ramble in the fields of Paradise, and dared to fancy amiable and lovely creatures sympathizing with my feelings and cheering in my gloom; their angelic countenances breathed smiles of consolation. But it was all a dream: no Eve soothed my sorrows, or shared my thoughts; I was alone. I remember Adam's supplication to his Creator; but where was mine? He had abandoned me. (Shelley 2018, 123)

That reflection is the reason why he decides to persecute his creator. The monster seems convinced to have found the solution to his unbearable existence; that is, the request for a second experiment in which Frankenstein endows life to a female companion of his own characteristics. He renders his personal story of misery in order to move his creator to empathize with him, but also to claim what he considers a compensation for the pain, something he demands by right:

> You must create a female for me, with whom I can live and interchange those sympathies necessary for my being. This you alone can do; and I demand it of you as a right which you must not refuse […] I demand a creature of another sex, but as hideous as myself: the gratification is small, but it is all that I can receive, and it shall content

me. It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off from the world; but on that account we shall be more attached to one another. (Shelley 2018, 136-137)

2.3. The Modern Prometheus

John Milton's influence has been undoubtedly acknowledged as central to the novel which, in turn, and in a more secular way, connects with a Romantic reassessment of the Prometheus myth, whose influence was made obvious by Shelley's subtitle for the novel: *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*.

Critics such as Liveley argue that "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is, like its own monster, notoriously made up of disparate literary genres and parts, stitched together into a novel shape at once familiar and strange." (2018, 25). The novel is familiar because it gathers and combines myths from classical literature which in Shelley's times had already reached a universal status within the Western cultural tradition. According to Liveley, Mary Shelley is especially influenced by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Prometheus combines the natural elements of chaos to mould the first human being, thus defying the equilibrium of the cosmos, previously established by a deity (2018, 26-27). However, the author reinterprets some of these myths, particularly the Prometheus one, adapting them to contemporary debates:

> *Frankenstein* echoes the old stories of Faust and Prometheus, exploring the limits of ambition and rebelliousness and their moral implications; but it is also the tale of a "*modern Prometheus*," and as such it is a secular myth, with no metaphysical machinery, no gods: the creation is from mortal bodies with the assistance of electricity [...]. (Levine and Knoepflmacher 1979, 4)

Victor Frankenstein designs his creature on the basis of the exhaustive study of scientific principles. As discussed in the first chapter, both author and novel are inseparable from the revolutionary ideas of Enlightenment, especially that of the overpowering reason over imagination, which is the one that defines the scientist as a "modern Prometheus". While in

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Prometheus defied the equilibrium of the cosmos, Frankenstein questions directly if such an equilibrium exists in modern times due to the crisis of traditional values.

Nevertheless, and apart from adapting the Prometheus myth to modern times in terms of scientific knowledge, Mary Shelley's subtitle also alludes to the influence of the Romantic imagination, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar defend: "In acknowledgement of this web of literary/familial relationships, critics have traditionally studied *Frankenstein* as an interesting example of Romantic myth-making, a work ancillary to such established Promethean masterpieces as Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* and Byron's *Manfred*" (1979, 221). By doing so, Shelley engages with the conception of Prometheus as the epitome of the creative artist, analysed through different perspectives in Botting's seminal study *Making Monstrous* (1991).

2.4. The Female Creature

The influence of Romantic imagination could explain why although Victor's first reaction is to refuse the monster's plea of a female companion, he eventually "is moved by an awakened conscience to do justice toward his Adam and promises to create a female creature, on condition that both leave forever the neighborhood of mankind" (Mellor 1998, 6). Frankenstein postpones the project on numerous occasions, until he collects the necessary materials and heads to an isolated spot of Scotland to carry out the enterprise. In the middle of the process of creation, he feels overwhelmed by different fears. In contrast with his first experiment, this time he meditates about the possible consequences:

> As I sat, a train of reflection occurred to me, which led me to consider the effects of what I was now doing. Three years before I was engaged in the same manner, and had created a fiend whose unparalleled barbarity had desolated my heart, and filled it for ever with the bitterest remorse. I was now about to form another being, of whose dispositions I was alike ignorant; she might become ten thousand times more malignant

than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in the desserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form? She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man; she might quit him, and he be again alone, exasperated by the fresh provocation of being deserted by one of his own species. Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the daemon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. (Shelley 2018, 160-161)

According to Mellor, "he is afraid of an independent female will, afraid that his female creature will have desires and opinions that cannot be controlled by his male creature" (1998, 6). Mellor also compares this new being to Rousseau's natural man, since she might be unwilling to accept a social contract established even before her birth; instead, she might claim the right to conduct her own life (1998, 7).

These fears become even more meaningful if we take into account the scientist's relationship with Elizabeth, his half-sister from childhood selected as his fiancé by his parents. However, González Moreno states that "Víctor solo se quiere a sí mismo, y entiende el amor no como unidad, sino como propiedad. Elizabeth es un regalo, una más de sus posesiones" (2007, 203). Regarding this relationship, Knoepflmacher affirms that "Victor's desire to marry Elizabeth is a pathetic and hopeless attempt to reenter the broken circle of affection over which his dead mother had presided. Conversely, the Monster's similar yearning for a female companion is treated as highly dangerous" (1979, 106).

If Victor understands love in terms of property, apparently through the possession of a woman by a man, then he unconsciously asserts women's incapacity to determine their own existence. He takes this incapacity to act freely for granted in the case of Elizabeth. According to Knoepflmacher's thesis, Frankenstein also sees her as a means to receive the domestic

affection he lacks due to the death of his mother. These ideas suggest a strong division of gender roles in the book, defined by Mellor as part of a "general cultural encoding of the female as passive and possessable, the willing receptacle of male desire" (1998, 1).

However, in the case of the female monster, and for the first time in the novel, Victor fears a threat to the passivity and domesticity imposed on women: "She defies that sexist aesthetic that insists that women be small, delicate, modest, passive, and sexually pleasing—but available only to their lawful husbands" (Mellor 1998, 7). In connection with Victor's reference to the possibility to propagate a "race of devils", Mellor's postulate reveals that,

> What Victor Frankenstein truly fears is female sexuality as such. A woman who is sexually liberated, free to choose her own life, her own sexual partner (by force, if necessary). And to propagate at will can appear only monstrously ugly to Victor Frankenstein. (1998, 7)

It seems as if the mere idea of a female who develops an independent behaviour represented monstrosity to Victor. For all these reasons, he is driven by the mad impulse to violently destroy the body of the creature: "I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and, trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged" (Shelley 2018, 161).

The scene of destruction of the female creature has been discussed by Judith Halberstam, who wrote:

> The material horror of the female monster with her female genitals enrages and terrifies the scientist, he tears her limb from limb and scatters her flesh upon the ground. The vision of Victor wrestling with the female flesh of the monster has the horrifying effect of a primal scene. The act of reproduction becomes here a bloody mess of dismemberment, a deconstruction of woman into her messiest and most slippery parts. […] In this scene deconstruction becomes a bloody act of violence, and a gendered violence at that. (1995, 47)

As suggested by Halberstam, not only does Frankenstein steal the feminine powers of reproduction but when he feels threatened by these powers, he needs to reassert his masculinity evoking a violent rape by penetrating and mutilating the female body (Mellor 1998, 7).

2.5. The Feminization of the Male Creature: Gender as a Social Construct

Botting defends that "no topic of aesthetic enquiry in the eighteenth century generated greater interest than the sublime" (2014, 36). Botting considers Edmund Burke's theorization on the sublime in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) as one of the major contributions to the definition of the principle, as well as one of the seminal texts which permeated the Romantic imagination, especially in what pertains the distinction between the aesthetic categories of the "beautiful" and the "sublime": "For Burke, beautiful objects were characterised by their smallness, smoothness, delicacy and gradual variation. They evoked love and tenderness in contrast to the sublime which produced awe and terror. Objects which evoked sublime emotions were vast, magnificent and obscure". (Botting 2014, 36).

However, González Moreno goes beyond Burke's initial aesthetic dimension of the sublime and analyses Mary Shelley's treatment of this in *Frankenstein* from a gender perspective which, in turn, reaches back to Anne K. Mellor's feminist criticism of the category in *Romanticism and Gender* (2007):

> Burke's aesthetic classifications participated in, and helped to support, a powerful hegemonic sexual politics. As he constructed the category of the beautiful, Burke also constructed the image of the ideal woman, as his illustrative remarks reveal. Beauty is identified with the softer virtues, with easiness of temper, compassion, kindness and liberality, as opposed to the higher qualities of the mind, those virtues which cause admiration such as fortitude, justice and wisdom, and which Burke assigned to the masculine sublime… Beauty, for Burke, is identified not only with the nurturing mother but also with the erotic love-object, the sensuous and possessable beloved. Identifying beauty with the small… Burke revealingly commented that "we submit to what we

admire, but we love what submits to us". The ideal woman, then, is one who engages in a practice of what today we would call female masochism, willingly obeying the dictates of her sublime master. (Mellor 1993, 108)

Departing from Mellor's premises, Moreno produces her interpretation of the monster in the novel as "la mujer sin nombre" (2007, 207), also aided by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's disquisitions in *The Madwoman in the Attic,* in which they refer to the creature as "as nameless as a woman is in patriarchal society" (1979, 241). Moreno's vision of the monster postulates that:

> El interior inicial de la criatura era bello, pero obligada por el exterior a ser sublime. Recordemos cómo se deleitaba con todo aquello que respondía al sentimiento de lo bello, y por extensión, al de lo femenino: pretendía ser un espíritu guardián de los *cottagers* e inspirar amor. Mary Shelley proyecta sobre la criatura lo que es ser mujer en una sociedad patriarcal que *construye* lo femenino en base a sus propios criterios, de igual manera que Frankenstein ha *construido* su propia criatura. De esta forma, se pone de manifiesto la concepción de la mujer en términos de alteridad, de lo Otro […] El monstruo es el resultado de las pretensiones masculinas, es el resultado de descubrir que ser mujer es igual a la inadecuación. (2007, 208)

As Moreno explains, the androgyny of the male creature defies the gender-based notion of the beautiful and the sublime, while simultaneously suggesting, by doing so, that gender could be regarded as a social construct.

The assumption of gender as a social construct is an issue largely explored by a wide variety of feminist critics. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the notion of gender and its relationship with sex has been discussed among a wide variety of scholars from different fields of knowledge; especially medicine, psychology, history, sociology, and literary criticism. Initially, the two categories seemed to be understood as "natural" facts determined by biology. However, as time passed, social scientists and historians challenged the premise of gender as something rooted in nature, giving rise to a more complex hypothesis by which sex is related to biology, but gender is analysed within the context of culture. Thus, whereas sex is something pre-given to our bodies, gender refers to the social meanings typically associated to

femininity and masculinity in any given community. Therefore, womanhood and manhood can be interpreted as social constructs, definitions fixed by society that contain codes of behaviour and development of identity according to gender (2015, 3-9)

Furthermore, feminist writers have recently developed theories about gender as a social construct and its impact on individuals, such as the division of social roles; that is, the expectations and duties imposed on every human being towards society, explained in the words of Richardson and Robinson as follows:

> The main focus of work on gender carried out during the 1970s and 1980s was on exploring the production of masculinity and femininity. Many feminist writers […] argued that gender is culturally determined and that we become differently gendered through socialisation into gender roles, or as it was often termed then, 'sex roles'. Sex role theory, drawing on principles of social learning theory, claimed that through various learning processes (for example, observation, imitation, modelling, differential reinforcement) and agencies of socialisation (for example parents, teachers, peers, the media) children learn the social meanings, values, norms and expectations associated with 'being a girl' or 'being a boy' […]. This is what we might refer to nowadays as the process of *becoming gendered,* involving learning specific ideas, practices and values associated with gender. (2015, 10)

For this reason, the distinction between the aesthetic categories of the "beautiful" and the "sublime" are undoubtedly gendered: they fit into the personality characteristics assigned to women and to men in Mary Shelley's times. The gendered classification of these principles is what explains the hybridity of Shelley's monster and its metaphorical identification as "la mujer sin nombre":

> La visión de esa mujer asertiva que se mueve entre lo bello -ser mujer atendiendo a los cánones establecidos- y lo sublime -ser asertiva como es el hombre-, y que, a la postre, resulta una amenaza, cristaliza en la concepción de la mujer como monstruo tan habitual en la tradición (Arpías, Sirenas y Gorgonas); personajes femeninos como Matilda en The Monk*,* Geraldine, Lamia y Carmilla son, según hemos podido comprobar, emblemáticos de una belleza contaminada con el dolor, la corrupción y la muerte. Como la criatura [Frankenstein's Monster], son quimeras representativas de un comportamiento inadecuado, que se *muestran* como epítome de las consecuencias de tratar de la autoridad patriarcal. (González Moreno 2007, 208)

In conclusion, Mary Shelley's Gothic construction of monstrosity is subversive because it implies a strong defiance to gender roles (whether this effect was deliberately intended or not). Ellen Moers says that "In Gothic writings fantasy predominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural, with one definite auctorial intent: to scare." (1979, 77). But Shelley's suggested fear has to do with social threats rather than the supernatural itself. In *Frankenstein, Feminism and Literary Theory* Diane Long Hoeveler analyses the novel from the point of view of cultural studies, queer theory and disability studies. Departing from Jonathan Dollimore's historical materialism, Hoeveler develops a theory of "the perverse", a concept which alludes to something that conducts us when binary structures collapse. These structures are oppositions (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual) that function as the cornerstone of society. Departing from such premises, Dollimore argues that Victor reaches the dimension of the perverse because the creation of the monster threatens society's established order by defying binary oppositions such as male versus female (2003, 58).

Conclusions

This dissertation has examined the various ways in which Mary Shelley drew from and reassessed Gothic conventions in *Frankenstein*, which ultimately reveals the writer's particular construction of gender. To this purpose, in the previous sections I have analysed the novel through the lens of several concepts in feminist literary criticism. One of the first significant findings that emerges from this study is the extent to which the choice of a particular literary genre enables writers to address different questions pertaining to their personal or social circumstances.

At the end of the eighteenth century, radical shifts in culture and society were taking place in Europe, one of the most significant ones being the gradual displacement of religion as the governing force of individual lives in favour of a rationalist understanding of the world. The collapse of former conceptions of reality had its impact on literature, which invariably mirrors social transformations. In this sense, the birth of Gothic fiction must be read as a cultural response to a crisis of traditional values.

The most common human reaction to a period of uncertainty is fear, and the expression of such a feeling is at the core of Gothic texts, both as a source of inspiration and as target of the stories. Paradoxically, writers within this tradition sought at once to relieve anxieties and to make readers aware of the instability which contemporary worldviews actually entailed. As a reaction against the light of reason, Gothic writers aspired to access the realm of darkness by tackling those elements which reason left unexplained, thus transporting the reader to a different dimension that would allegedly allow for an experience of the Romantic Sublime. However, although the articulation of fear is one of the universal characteristics of the genre, the particular way in which this is encoded constitutes a subjective process. The presence of supernatural elements and beings, as well as distant settings in terms of time and space were

some of the basic elements which a large number of Gothic writers used to achieve destabilising effects.

However, and as I have argued in this dissertation, Mary Shelley was exceptional in her reassessment of Gothic patterns in *Frankenstein*. Rather than setting her novel in a time and place largely detached from her readers' ordinary experience, Shelley placed characters and events in the novel closer to the reader, which produced a radical sense of instability and insecurity due to their familiarity and immediacy. On the other hand, and while many Gothic writers used in their narratives monsters or supernatural figures to scare readers, Shelley rather pursued a sentiment of sympathy and compassion towards her creature, who is given a voice to narrate in the first person the causes of his misfortunes and his eventual downfall. As such, Shelley's creature vindicates his inherently good nature and blames his creator for his utter lack of responsibility and society as a whole for his own moral corruption. Therefore, Shelley inspired terror by signalling humanity's lack of empathy as the ultimate motivation which actually triggers the appearance of monsters. Departing from those Enlightened principles that consider individuals as purely rational beings, *Frankenstein* teaches its readers to fear the moral consequences of our acts.

Although moral issues are predominant in Shelley's novel, different forms of intertextuality help to enhance the validity of such topics: some relevant intertextual allusions reach back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or John Milton's *Paradise Lost,* which are seminal for an understanding of the novel's full significance.

Furthermore, *Frankenstein* also addresses issues of transgression and monstrosity, which are not seen in terms of the social circumstances that conditioned Shelley's times, but also as the outcome of an individual experience of reality in which gender plays an important role. In this sense, Mary Shelley's traumatic experience with motherhood turned out to be essential for

the process of creation of *Frankenstein*. Although many critics have acknowledged the suffering which motherhood entailed for Shelley, pain was not often regarded as an acceptable feeling in relation to maternity, since this was often considered an experience for which women would be "naturally" prepared and which would fulfil their expectations as women. In Shelley's novel, however, postnatal depression and trauma seem to be at the core of her creation of an ambitious scientist who eventually abandons his creature.

The idealised, canonical femininity imposed on women certain societal roles and behaviours which limited their individual freedom and conducted her lives according to particular patterns. Such expectations, which constrained women's freedom and placed men in a position of power, have been also examined in this dissertation, which also brought about a discussion on the construction of female characters and the expression of male dominance throughout the book. Women in *Frankenstein* are underrepresented or victimized, seen as objects of desire for male purposes.

As suggested above, Mary Shelley's novel meant a subversion not only of traditional conventions within the Gothic genre, but also important advancements in women's literature as a whole, since *Frankenstein* continues to be, to this date, a pioneering work in the articulation of women's experience under non-realist principles, while, paradoxically, addressing very concrete anxieties for women. It is true that Gothic fiction is firmly rooted in the unconscious, and, as such, closely connected to imagination, desire and terror, but at the same time, its practice aims to trigger a liberating process to unleash deep anxieties. Therefore, the expression of women's deep concerns through fantasy fiction can also be interpreted as an empowering pratice that served as a means for asserting their individuality. Thus, Shelley's example certainly encouraged other women to claim a space of their own outside the domestic sphere in which they were confined, and they did so either as art producers or simply as individuals with the right to express their own thoughts and needs.

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