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(Post) Apocalyptic Shelley: Science, Disease, and the End of Humanity in *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*

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(Post) Apocalyptic Shelley: Science, Disease, and the End of Humanity in *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*

Table of contents

Introduction……**3**

Chapter One……**8**

1.1. Utopia, dystopia, apocalypse: an overview……8

1.2 From Thomas More to John Stuart Mill: the evolution of utopian, dystopian and apocalyptic thought and literature across the ages……..11

1.3 Dystopia and apocalypse: characteristics and imagery of a genre that shaped Mary Shelley's viewpoint……21

Chapter Two……**29**

2.1 Introductory remarks on English Romanticism and Millenarianism……29

2.2 *Frankenstein*, *or The Modern Prometheus:* between scientific hope and the failure of individual ambition……..41

2.3 Frankenstein's creature: A dystopian experiment of human improvement and scientific progress still relevant in the contemporary age……..56

Chapter Three……**65**

3.1 The topos of lastness and the Malthusian theory in the first (post) apocalyptic novel……...65

3.2 Plague and the end of humanity in "the apocalypse without millennium".....73

3.3 *The Last Man* and the making of a post-human world……..…….85

Conclusions……...**94**

Works Cited……**99**

Sitography……...**105**

INTRODUCTION

> I felt as if my soul were grappling with a palpable enemy; one by one the various keys were touched which formed the mechanism of my being [...] soon my mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose. So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein, - more, far more, I will achieve [...] I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation. I closed not my eyes that night. My internal being was in a state of insurrection and turmoil.[1]

From the very first pages of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* as it can be inferred from this passage, the reader perceives one of the recurrent motifs of the story: here, the protagonist, the noble Victor Frankenstein, still a student at the University of Ingolstadt, declares his strong interest in pursuing knowledge. Not only does he desire to know more; what the reader witnesses in this passage is, indeed, Victor Frankenstein's craving to overcome the limits of scientific knowledge, ultimately eradicating disease and mortality from human experience. This is the moment in which Victor Frankenstein first conceives the idea of creating what will turn into the so-called monster. Thus, it is also the first scene where the reader beholds Victor Frankenstein's scientific hybris, which eventually leads the scientist to a tragic downfall.

Mary Shelley (London, 1797-1851) wrote *Frankenstein* when she was only nineteen years old, the novel firstly being published anonymously in 1818. Only in retrospect, during the twentieth century, there was a reappraisal of Mary Shelley as a major author in her own right, when scholarship has started to view the author as the forerunner of modern Gothic fiction. Although *Frankenstein* remains her most celebrated novel, Mary Shelley was a prolific writer and critic, leaving an indelible mark particularly in Gothic, dystopian, and science fiction literature. A decade

[1] Shelley, M. *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus*. Edited by M.K. Joseph. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 48.

after conceiving *Frankenstein*, in 1826, Mary Shelley published the innovative novel *The Last Man*, considered by many as a pivotal work that contributed to the evolution of dystopian literature and the post-apocalyptic sub-genre.

Most certainly, nowadays dystopian fiction has become part of our common reading habits, mirroring the contemporary dynamics of increasing scientific and technological developments that profoundly impact our lives and our society, as well as sudden political changes and worldwide uneven power relations. Existential concerns such as debilitating illnesses, daunting scenarios of mortality and solitude, the threat of an uncontrolled use of science and societal collapse have long fascinated the human imagination in a continuous contrast with the opposed attitude of optimism and hope in progress or faith.

This study, titled *(Post) Apocalyptic Shelley: Science, Disease, and the End of Humanity in Frankenstein and The Last Man* aims to analyse Shelley's visionary contribution to the genres of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction, highlighting their resonance in the contemporary debate on literature, science and technology. By examining the intertwined themes of scientific ambition, human vulnerability in the face of disease, and human extinction-related anxieties, this work situates Shelley not only as a central figure during the English Romanticism movement, but also as a pioneer of modern dystopian and post-apocalyptic concerns. Both *The Last Man* and the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein, or the modern Prometheus*, which contains Shelley's important revisions, are taken into account for this analysis. *Frankenstein* as a novel has shaped the universal framework which describes, among other topics, our relationship with technology.[2] Its hallmarks of Gothicism and terror have been re-interpreted in a variety of forms and arts, from the first theatrical play in London, *Presumption, or the fate of Frankenstein* (1823) which established Mary Shelley's success, to the modern cinematographic adaptations in films such as the classic *Frankenstein*

[2] Bernat, P. "Technology, utopia and dystopia: modern technological change in early literary depictions", in Kultura I Wychowanie, Nr 5 (1), 2013, p. 42.

(1931) directed by James Whale, or the most recent 2025 Guillermo del Toro's adaptation. The persistent imagery of the obsessed scientist and his creature turned into a merciless monster is telling of the immense impact of Mary Shelley's novel, due not only to the narration of a tragic story and memorable characters, but also because *Frankenstein* forces readers to face their most profound fears, confronting themselves with their morality and with the burden of personal responsibility. Additionally, *The Last Man,* despite being less celebrated than her debut novel, has undergone a critical re-evaluation in recent decades. This reconsideration is mainly due to the themes presented in the novel, which deeply resonate with contemporary concerns about global pandemics, the threat of human extinction, and the subsequent sense of loneliness, aligning the novel with current issues. Shelley utilized the narrative mode to subvert and criticize the theories and ideals of her contemporaries on a variety of critical topics, from philosophy to scientific concerns. William Godwin, Mary Wollstonecraft, R.T. Malthus and Lord George Byron are only some of the influential figures who played a pivotal role in Mary Shelley's intellectual and literary formation, together with her husband, the poet Percy B. Shelley.

In order to better understand Mary Shelley's significance in the context of dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction, this thesis is divided into three chapters. The first chapter will provide a general framework of the characteristic themes of the dystopian literary genre. The concepts of utopia, dystopia and apocalypse will be explored, both in their conceptual formation and in the literary and narrative tradition. Drawing from important studies in this field, such the ones conducted by Gregory Claeys, L. T. Sargent and Greg Garrard, who extensively investigate the utopian and apocalyptic thoughts across the ages, relevant notions on the origins and the developments of these concepts will be taken into account, from Thomas More's foundational narrative work *Utopia* (1516) to the more political connotation of the word 'dystopia' given by John Stuart Mill in 1868.

The second chapter will focus on the analysis of *Frankenstein*, briefly situating the novel

within the literary movement of English Romanticism. In this period, such major authors as William Wordsworth, Lord Byron and Percy B. Shelley consistently used apocalyptic imagery in their works. This imagery also occurs at the level of socio-political and philosophical debates, as reflected by the ideals of radical thinkers such as William Godwin. Therefore, this chapter will explore the pivotal critique brought about by *Frankenstein* against Shelley's contemporary ideals, as in the case of Godwinian notion of perfectibility. Drawing from eminent scholars of Mary Shelley's life and works, including Esther Schor, Anne K. Mellor, and Chris Washington, the analysis will underscore the main themes linked with science and technology, highlighting the way in which Mary Shelley contrasted or subverted the ideals of her contemporaries.

Finally, the third and last chapter will revolve around *The Last Man*, credited by a number of scholars as the first modern post-apocalyptic novel. By discussing the novel and considering the critical discourse of authors such as Lee Sterrenburg, Robert Snyder and Morton D. Paley, who contributed to the studies on English Romanticism and on Mary Shelley's works, the chapter will stress the themes that most prominently emerge from *The Last Man*, namely a worldwide disease and the end of humanity.

Both novels highlight Mary Shelley's disillusionment with the Romantic ideals of great enterprises, engaging with political and scientific theories, such as R. T. Malthus's conservative ideas on the tension between population growth and natural resources, to explore personal and ideological anxieties. While *Frankenstein* depicts the catastrophic consequences of individual scientific hybris, *The Last Man* offers an insightful account of the inevitable decay of humanity and its institutions in the face of an implacable disease.

Ultimately, through this work I will investigate how Mary Shelley's innovative literary creations bridge nineteenth-century Gothic fiction with the enduring fears of the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genre. As Betty T. Bennett notes, Mary Shelley refracted the world "through the

prism of her own personal experience"[3], as the other Romantics used to do. However, by intertwining her private life experiences with contemporaneous concerns in her novels Mary Shelley also paved the way for modern science fiction and dystopian literature, her oeuvres still resonating with universal debates on human responsibility in the scientific field, the constant progress of technology and its consequences, as well as primordial fears of solitude.

[3] Bennet, B.T. "Mary Shelley's letters: the public/private self", in E. Schor (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 17.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1. Utopia, dystopia, apocalypse: an overview

Throughout the ages, the terms 'utopia', 'dystopia' and 'apocalypse' have been adapted progressively to the changes and needs of societies, and are now being recurrently used to identify a specific literary genre, dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature. For this reason, in order to better appreciate the analysis of Mary Shelley's novels in the next chapters, it is first necessary to retrace the origins of these concepts.

The very first definition of the term 'utopia' given by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is: "With capital initial. An imaginary island in Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), presented by the narrator as having a perfect social, legal, and political system."[4] It is added that critical debate developed on the degree to which More's work actually intended to represent an ideal society, in light of the apparently satirical elements presented in the book.[5] As the list of definitions expands, it becomes clear that, despite the historical shift in usage and context, the discourse on 'utopia' generally revolves around the archetype of a perfect place or system, whether it be hypothetical or real. The third definition describes 'utopia' as a fictional work of literature where an idealised society is shown, whereas the last point states that 'utopia' may also identify an exemplary, yet impossible to realize, state of existence: that is, a dream, or a vision.[6] Similarly, in his work *The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited* (1994) Lyman Tower Sargent considers the deriving broader concept of utopianism as a form of "social dreaming", in the sense of "dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live."[7] The ability to imagine a

[4] "Utopia, *N.*" *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, March 2026. Accessed April, 2026. doi.org/10.1093/OED/7153815023.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Sargent, L. "The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited". *Utopian Studies*, vol 5, n 1, 1994, p. 3.

different society, hopefully a better one, seems therefore to be intrinsic in human nature, as a desire that pushes humankind to improve.

However, it is also evident that some of those expectations were not adequately fulfilled, as Sargent himself implies when including nightmares in his definition. It is as if this tendency to achieve some sort of perfection may actually have a dramatic downside, turning into a diametrical opposition; this possibility interestingly mirrors the ill-fated trajectory of Victor Frankenstein's fate in Shelley's novel. Moreover, 'utopia' can be juxtaposed to the term 'dystopia', which conveys the idea of a "negative utopia, a society that does not work."[8] Gregory Claeys, in the opening lines of his work *Dystopia: a natural history. A study of modern despotism, its antecedents, and its literary diffractions* (2017) claims that "the word 'dystopia' evokes disturbing images", especially related to destroyed landscapes, cataclysms and wars.[9] Likewise, considering the OED's explanation, 'dystopia' is in this case "an imaginary place or condition in which everything is as bad as possible; opposed to utopia *n*."[10] Despite this, as it will be shown in the next paragraph, such a clear-cut distinction is rarely respected, especially in literary works of fiction.

If 'dystopia' is understood as a condition in which society has deteriorated or collapsed, then, it becomes almost inevitable to associate it with apocalyptic scenarios, the word 'apocalypse' becoming a synonym for cataclysms and disasters.[11] Despite its original meaning having shifted, this term still carries on its symbolism related to primordial human fears and anxieties of the end of the world. As Garrard clarifies in his work *Ecocriticism,* "for at least 3,000 years, a fluctuating proportion of the world's population has believed that the end of the world is imminent"[12], being widespread among various and ancient cultures. This notion also developed in a literary genre

[8] Vînău, N. "Utopia. Dystopia. Concepts in Contemporary Architecture and Visual Arts". *Argument*, 2020, p. 183.
[9] Claeys, G. *Dystopia: A Natural History*. *A study of modern despotism, its antecedents, and its literary diffractions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 3.
[10] "Dystopia, N." *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford UP, July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1112513959.
[11] Pitetti, C. "Uses of the End of the World: Apocalypse and Postapocalypse as Narrative Modes." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol 44, n 3, 2017, p. 439.
[12] Garrard, G. *Ecocriticism*. London: Routledge, 2004, p. 85.

known as 'apocalypticism', which finds its roots in religious scriptures.[13] Over the ages, the theme of apocalypse has inspired artists, writers and filmmakers to create works of entertainment and cultural products. Scientific and technological developments play a role in the modern dystopian and post-apocalyptic imagery, as well. As stated by Schmeink, scientific discoveries in biology and genetics, such as the Human Genome Project (HGP), have been such that they also affected "mainstream culture and the popular imaginary of science fiction."[14] In fact, the nexus between science and new sociological theories allowed the development of post-human and trans-human discourses during the last century in the form of "biopunk", a subgenre deriving from the cyberpunk.[15] Moreover, dystopian and science-fiction literature, films and videogames still fascinate the audience due to their concern with the present changes of society and how they affect human lives[16], as well as the possibility they display to criticize these issues. By taking into account these preliminary notions, it is evident why such worrying scenarios of a societal collapse have inspired debates in politics, philosophy and the arts, and why, within this context, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* are not simply examples of Gothic and science fiction novels. In fact, they also meet with present-day ideological concerns, and can therefore be considered as the forerunners of the modern dystopian genre. While *Frankenstein* is universally known as the story of scientific excess and desperation, the less celebrated yet equally incisive *The Last Man* shows "how apocalyptic narratives can reframe our sense of time and authority"[17], as well as the sense of

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[13] Ibid., p. 86.

[14] Schmeink, L. *Biopunk Dystopias: Genetic Engineering, Society, and Science Fiction*. Liverpool University Press, 2016, p. 5.

[15] Ibid., p. 21. Schmeink explains this term after Sterling's claim of cyberpunk in science fiction as a literary embodiment of the new techno-scientific developments of the XX century.

[16] Ibid., p. 11. It is also interesting to note how literature has always been a source of inspiration for the creation of other creative and cultural artifacts. For instance, in his book Schmeink dedicates a chapter to the case study of a science-fictional videogame called *BioShock*, which "takes place in an underwater city in an alternate history of 1960" (pp. 148-9), presenting a grim account of corporate domination, technological disaster and totalitarian authority (p. 152). Schmeink reports that the creative director of the videogame, Ken Levine "thanked his 'useless liberal arts degree' for providing the literary inspiration for the game and referenced the 'sort of utopian and dystopian writings of the 20th century […] [such as] Huxley, Orwell and Rand' (cited in Perry) as the main motivation for the storyline." (p. 149).

[17] Zolciak, O. "Sublimating an Apocalypse: An Exploration of Anxiety, Authorship, and Feminist Theory in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*". *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, vol 77, n 5, November, 2018.

survival, on a global scale, demonstrating how a worldwide plague may reshape both social structures and humanity's understanding of its own future.

1.2 From Thomas More to John Stuart Mill: the evolution of utopian, dystopian and apocalyptic thought and literature across the ages

Utopian, dystopian and apocalyptic themes have characterized not only religion and literature, but also political and sociological ideas across the centuries. Because of their ancient origins, these themes are complex to define, both in their theoretical aspect and in the literary field; for this reason, a number of scholars have studied the subject in great depth. Such exemplary studies are, for instance, Frank Kermode's theoretical and philosophical book *The sense of an Ending: Studies in the theory of fiction* (2000), which investigates, with an interdisciplinary approach, the meanings and the social functions of apocalyptic narratives in myths and sacred scriptures; the taxonomic classification of the dichotomy utopia-dystopia realized by Sargent in his essay *The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited* (1994); and Gregory Claeys's comprehensive work *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (2010), which delves into the evolution of utopia as a literary genre, from its origins during the Renaissance to the modern, twentieth-century dystopian literature. Mary Shelley's ideas and novels play a role in this literary genre, too, since she was part of the circle of Romantic intellectuals and poets together with Percy B. Shelley and Lord Byron, and was deeply affected by them. During the Romantic age, these authors were inspired by contemporary political, social events and by the imagery of apocalypse. This is why a deeper knowledge of the evolution of utopian, dystopian and apocalyptic thoughts is helpful to understand Mary Shelley's literary imagination both in *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, in order to analyse how her novels respond to the fears and anxieties of her own time, facing themes related to science, disease and humanity's fate.

The origins of the word apocalypse are rooted in the Greek term *apokalypsis,* which

conveys the literal meaning of a general unveiling or uncovering, indicating the revelation of mankind's destiny.[18] Taking into account Norman Cohn's work, Claeys observes that "visions of the apocalypse are at least as old as 1000 BC; when, in Norman Cohn's rendering, the triumph of chaos over order defined the Egyptian 'Prophecy of Neferti', which foretold of the complete breakdown of society."[19] The fact that apocalyptic ideas can be found already in ancient Egyptian myths highlights the cross-cultural dimension of the theme. The word 'apocalypse' subsequently entered the religious contexts as in the case of the Bible, used for the first time in English as the translation for the opening word of the Book of Revelation, and "in this context it suggests a revelation of divine knowledge."[20] Furthermore, James Berger attributes to 'apocalypse' three main meanings: on the one hand, the first is "the actual imagined end of the world, as presented in the New Testament Apocalypse of John"[21], together with other Jewish and early Christian apocalypses. On the other hand, the last meaning of apocalypse given by the author concerns its etymological roots of unveiling: in this regard, Berger claims that a proper apocalyptic event is an act of uncovering because it reveals the true nature of what is coming to an end.[22] Similarly to Berger's first consideration, Garrard traces the roots of 'apocalypse' in the Judeo-Christian scriptures, which initiated the resulting narrative mode. Hence, he also supports Thompson's idea in conceiving apocalypticism as a literary genre originated in times of crisis, a means through which humankind may find some sort of consolation or hope: "a genre [...] designed to stiffen the resolve of an embattled community by dangling in front of it the vision of a sudden and permanent release from its captivity. It is underground literature, the consolation of the persecuted."[23] The

[18] Cohn, N. as cited in Claeys, G., *Dystopia: A Natural History*. *A study of modern despotism, its antecedents, and its literary diffractions*, cit., p. 4.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Pitetti, C., Op. cit., p. 439.
[21] Berger, J. "Post-Apocalyptic rhetorics: how to speak after the end of Language", in *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 5.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Garrard, G. Op. cit, p. 86.

original meaning of 'apocalypse' conveys a sense of hope, framing the end of an era as a symbol of a potential rebirth and to this aim destruction is implied as a promise of regeneration.[24] This eschatological optimism eventually shifted, extending to more pessimistic narrative modes.

Intellectuals and scholars have long studied this subject in order to understand why we are fascinated with disruptive and tragic events, even with 'the End'. One of the reasons may be the intrinsic need to make sense of our existence, as well as of the event of death. For instance, Kermode in *The sense of an ending* (2000) claims that "men, like poets, rush [...] in medias res, when they are born; they also die in mediis rebus, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems."[25] That is, representations of the end of the world and of humanity are rooted in the existential concerns about mortality. According to Kermode, apocalyptic writing symbolically functions as a mirror to fears of mortality through imagination, myths or religion: as finite human beings, we have a profound need for intelligible ends.[26] From this perspective, both Garrard and Kermode suggest that storytelling and apocalyptic narratives have served as essential means through which humankind has attempted to make sense of its existence and of its end. Historical changes were interpreted as revolutionary events operating a rupture between past and present; these narratives therefore provide a way to organize the life span in what Kermode defines "consonance: a sense that historical time is governed by a definite [...] organizational principle inside of which events that would otherwise be experienced as chaotic or arbitrary find a place and a justification."[27]

Nonetheless, the meaning of 'apocalypse' underwent a transformation during the Romantic period, in the face of a different understanding of time, history and a shift towards a secular viewpoint. In fact, as Garrard points out:

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[24] Claeys, G., *Dystopia: A Natural History*. *A study of modern despotism, its antecedents, and its literary diffractions*, cit., p. 3.
[25] Kermode, F. *The sense of an Ending: Studies in the theory of fiction.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 7.
[26] Ibid., p. 8.
[27] Pitetti, C., Op. cit, p. 443.

> Eschatological themes and language in fact escaped the discipline of theology long before the twentieth century. The Romantic poetry of William Wordsworth, Percy Shelley (1792-1822) and William Blake (1757-1827) appropriated apocalyptic rhetoric for secular, often politically revolutionary aims, [...] for the most part, these writers were preoccupied with the fate of human culture.[28]

This is telling of a significant change in the apocalyptic vision between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries: the Romantic apocalyptic notion departed from a purely religious understanding of the concept, focusing instead on revolutionary ideals based on the crisis and the upheavals of that particular period of time, therefore showing a more pessimistic tone. In his work, Garrard also introduces the close bond between environmental concerns and apocalyptic rhetoric, especially when considering authors such as D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930).[29] It is widely acknowledged that environmental issues are one of the main concerns debated in post-apocalyptic fiction, yet this type of preoccupation did not originate in the twentieth century. As it will be explored in Chapter Three, the late eighteenth-century English philosopher and economist Thomas Malthus, considered by Garrard "the most influential forerunner to the modern environmental apocalypse"[30], studied the relationship between population growth and the limits of the world; traces of these themes may be found in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man,* as she was able to reframe the apocalyptic imagery in her own terms. As Boro states, when referring to the post-apocalyptic *The Last Man*, "Shelley's text departs from inherited models of religious apocalypticism, replacing eschatological teleology with a secular, speculative meditation on extinction and survivorship."[31] In this regard, Schmeink too recognizes the shift of apocalyptic vision in Romanticism, as well as

[28] Garrard, G, Op. cit, p. 89.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., p. 93.
[31] Boro, M. "A World Without Us: Plague, Pandemic, And Post-Apocalyptic Vision in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man.*" *Transcript: An e-Journal of Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol 5, n 2, 2025, p. 23.

the pivotal contribution of Mary Shelley's writings. Indeed, considering *Frankenstein* as the forerunner of a radical, new literary genre, Schmeink observes that, because of the Enlightenment, reason and the rational appropriated literature through scientific reasoning, which replaced the previous divine and magical sublime.[32] Besides, it can be argued that the modern science fiction genre radically reinterprets the original concept of apocalypse, drawing inspiration from nineteenth-century literature, such as *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, as noted by Boro and Schmeink. Consequently, 'apocalypse' is nowadays often synonymous with catastrophe and irreversible extinction. In this context, Mary Shelley's works are a fundamental turning point, inaugurating a tradition in which the end is no longer a passage towards the sacred, but a secular meditation on the extinction of the species.[33] It is also evident that the conceptual development of apocalypse is intertwined with its resulting literature. A similar type of interconnection can also be observed in the critical debates exploring concepts of utopia and dystopia, both as philosophical or political ideals and as literary forms. Gordin, Tilley and Prakash, in their introduction to *Utopia/Dystopia conditions of historical possibility* (2010), argue that utopian discourse has attracted significant academic attention since the Renaissance for its "religious roots in paradise, political roots in socialism, economic roots in communes."[34] This seems to suggest, for example, why utopia as a concept actually resists a single definition, remaining relevant to the present day. On the question of dystopia, their definition resembles the one previously discussed, focusing on a specific period of time: in fact, it is described as the twentieth-century utopia's doppelgänger flourishing in science fiction literature. For this reason, twentieth-century novels such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), or Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) are specifically addressed as dystopian narratives.[35]

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[32] Schmeink, L., Op. cit. p. 6.
[33] Boro, M., Op. cit., p. 23.
[34] Gordin, M. D., Tilley, H., Prakash, G. (eds) *Utopia/dystopia: Conditions of historical possibility*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 1.
[35] Ibid.

Tracing the concept back to its origins, scholars agree in considering Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) as the first literary work in which the word appeared, indicating the island where the action takes place. As Fatima Vieira clarifies, during the Renaissance 'utopia' was a neologism: deriving from the Greek, it acquired the meaning of "a place which is a non-place."[36] This profoundly changed over the centuries, and new words emerged as variants, for instance "eutopia, dystopia, anti-utopia [...] heterotopia, ecotopia."[37] In this regard, Sargent deeply examines these terms in search for a suitable definition, significantly contributing to the field of utopian studies not only as a literary genre, but also as a critical inquiry into the very nature of the concept. Considering these variations, Sargent distinguishes between a form of positive utopia called 'eutopia', that clearly displays a better society to the reader in contrast with his or her contemporary living situation,[38] and the negative utopia, 'dystopia', which "the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived."[39] In contrast with the general assumption that considers utopia as a perfect system, Sargent argues that variations of the word as 'anti-utopia' or 'critical utopia' may be used effectively to describe those utopias that "present a good place with problems and that reflect critically on the utopian genre itself."[40] Sargent introduces here an important aspect in the utopian debate, that is, the possibility to address and criticize different issues through this genre. Similarly, paraphrasing Claeys, utopian studies are intended as a critical lens, a comprehensive discipline that mirrors the various aspects of historical events and changes, allowing to reflect on whether they represent advancement or decline.[41] Reflecting Kermode's investigation on the topic, Sargent also finds traces of utopias even before More's work, as in the cases of myths, also called golden ages or arcadias, which share the common

[36] Vieira, F. "The concept of utopia", in Claeys G. (ed). *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 4.
[37] Ibid., p. 3.
[38] Sargent, L., Op. cit, p. 9.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., p. 8.
[41] Claeys G. (ed). *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 1.

feature of representing "simplicity, unity, security, immortality or an easy death, unity with God or the gods [...]."[42] The genre of utopian literature expanded even further during the seventeenth century, paving the way for the following literary works. Nicole Pohl, in her essay *Utopianism after More: the Renaissance and the Enlightenment*, retraces the development of the genre throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She notes, for instance, that in 1627 Francis Bacon wrote *New Atlantis* on the model of More's *Utopia*, setting the action on a remote island; a further example of utopia may be found in Gonzalo's speech in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611), which drew inspiration from Michel Montaigne's essay *On Cannibals* (1580) about primitivist issues on natural justice and virtue.[43] It is important to mention the fact that by this time, utopian literature was already mirroring the historical changes of its time. Likewise, Vieira notes that More's concept of utopia was strictly connected to his own times, in which the ancient world of Greeks and Romans was considered the peak of man's intellectual accomplishments; in the Renaissance, man became aware of how reason could be powerfully used to improve his life, longing for human perfection.[44] On the other hand, Pohl's examples of seventeenth-century utopian writings underline the fact that, in England, the societal order was increasingly destabilized by scientific discoveries and institutional reforms, such as a "distinct shift in ideal politics due to changes in the political arena, an increasing global trade and a historicized consciousness of time."[45] Hence, as the seventeenth century progressed with political upheavals and discoveries, utopian literature was deeply characterized by themes of imaginary voyages, such as lunar travels, mirroring the contemporary interest of expansion and colonization, and providing an answer to the new challenges of the seventeenth century.[46] At this point, a distinction from the previous utopian

[42] Sargent, L., Op. cit, p. 10.
[43] Pohl, N., "Utopianism after More: the Renaissance and the Enlightenment", in Claeys G. (ed). *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*. Cit., p. 52. In the same page, Pohl also reports the part of Gonzalo's speech which expresses his idea of utopia: "Had I plantation of this isle, my lord,/ And were the king on't, what would I do?".
[44] Vieira, F., Op. cit., pp. 4-9.
[45] Poh, N., Op. cit., p. 60.
[46] Ibid., pp. 53-54.

literary tradition occurs: Pohl points out the fact that seventeenth-century literature was also meant to develop a satire or a critique of contemporary society, as in the case of the 1638 lunar novel *The Man in the Moone: or a Discourse of a Voyage Thither by Domingo Gonzales the Speedy Messenger,* written by Bishop Francis Godwin, whose aim was to reflect critically on his contemporary world.[47] Satire is also one of the peculiar elements adopted by some of the most influential eighteenth-century authors in England. In alignment with Sargent's consideration about the critical standpoint assumed by utopian literature, Pohl asserts that "eighteenth century utopias might be collectively identified as offering a [...] critical utopia."[48] That is, instead of offering one possible utopian solution, these texts provide a critique because they consciously display the limitations of the classical utopian archetype, striving at the same time for a dynamic form of utopia.[49] A fundamental example is the parodic novel *Gulliver's travels* (1726) by Jonathan Swift, which, although echoing some of the formal characteristics of More's *Utopia*, is also more pessimistic in tone. According to Pohl, through the technique of distortion, Swift achieved an openly anti-utopian effect, raising questions on "language, history, perfectibility and, indeed, utopianism itself."[50] In contrast to this, Vieira offers an optimistic reading of the Enlightenment, underlining the fundamental role of science and of new discoveries in geology and biology as the means through which man was able to transfer scientific knowledge into the intellectual field; this allowed him to establish an optimistic worldview on a global theory of evolution, reaching positive outcomes both on future expectations, and on the socio-economic order in which he lived.[51]

However, the rational optimism of the Enlightenment clashed with the violent events that took place in the late eighteenth century, which represent another turning point in the connection between historical events and literature. In accordance with Pohl's viewpoint about the growth of

[47] Ibid., p. 54.
[48] Ibid., p. 65.
[49] Ibid., p. 66.
[50] Ibid., p. 67.
[51] Vieira, F., Op. cit., p. 10.

satirical writings as a form of social critique, Claeys notes that the utopian literature of this period can be interpreted as a discourse upon degeneration of the principle of reason, expressed through satire.[52] Meaningfully, Claeys identifies a fundamental breaking point in modernity in the French Revolution and, in the same period, "the first evidence of a theoretical and fictional dystopian turn of the type more commonly associated with the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."[53] As a pivotal event marking the end of a century and the beginning of another, the French Revolution and its aftermath had a great impact not only on political ideals, philosophy and social norms in France, but it also affected England and English literature as well. Some of the themes exposed in the previous paragraph became periodically present throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as for instance fantasies about the Apocalypse and the 'Last Man'.[54] According to Claeys, the disruptive events of the French Revolution created a dialectical relation between the revolutionary ideals of equality, the philosophical concept of perfectibility, and the creation of fictional utopias and dystopias as a response. Consequently, on the one hand the Revolution's ideals inspired writers to imagine perfect societies, on the other, they created satiric fiction or critical writings "of the new philosophy, loosely defined as 'perfectibility', which portrayed Godwinian invocations of a society governed by reason as inducing disaster […]."[55] Most importantly, Claeys's relevant analysis shows that the major dystopian strands adopted in later fiction, namely population control and socialism, actually emerged in this period addressed by Malthus's *Essay on Population* (1798), which Claeys considers to be the most influential anti-utopian work of the nineteenth century, and whose first edition was addressed to the philosopher William Godwin, Mary Shelley's father.[56] As it will be explored in the second chapter, the

[52] Claeys, G. "The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell", in Claeys, G. (ed.) *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*. Cit., p. 110.
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

Godwinian ideals of perfectibility promoted in Britain for the development of Enlightenment utopianism, are later deconstructed not only by Malthus's study on population growth, but also by Mary Shelley's subversive critique.

Marilyn Butler notes that, between 1789 and 1830 England was undergoing a period of change as well as of menace of a revolution; this atmosphere led many intellectuals, such as Carlyle or John Stuart Mill, to write about cataclysmic events.[57] English intellectuals reconsidered the period of the French Revolution even though "awareness of society as an organism was relatively new."[58] At the turn of the century, in fact, there was the emerging idea that society could develop and fall, characterized by an evolutionary process like a living organism.[59] Moreover, the French utopian philosophers envisaged with optimism a better, imaginary society set in the future. However, this vision of progress was not shared by the English thinkers, who found the key to the critique in the satire, as argued by Vieira.[60] In England, authors such as Shaftesbury, Locke and Hume wrote with the specific aim of satirizing "the present through the criticism of an imagined society, and the result of this situation was that the constructive, positive spirit that would preside in utopian texts was in fact lost."[61] Utopian literature, therefore, started to assume a more pessimistic and satirical tone than the original works of the Renaissance, due to the impactful events that affected every aspect of modern society. Finally, after decades marked by great historical developments and political, philosophical and scientific debates, in the second half of the nineteenth century 'utopia' found its juxtaposition in the word 'dystopia', firstly used as a theoretical concept. In fact, the earliest recorded use of the word 'dystopia' dates to 1868. During a parliamentary speech, the philosopher John Stuart Mill introduced this term as a conceptual

[57] Butler, M. *Romantics, Rebels, and Reactionaries: English Literature and Its Background, 1760-1830.* Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 178.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Vieira, F. Op. cit., p. 11.
[61] Ibid.

opposition to utopia, using the word 'dystopia' interchangeably with 'cacotopia', to criticize and denounce the government's Irish land system.[62] Sharing a similar etymology, in this context 'dystopia' conveys notions of something unpleasant or incorrect, and even of corruption and abnormality.[63] From that moment onwards, the word dystopia has been regularly used with this connotation in twentieth-century literature that deals with an alternative universe, as noted by Claeys.[64] The consolidation of dystopia both as a literary and a conceptual category is therefore deeply tied to historical events, not only of the Renaissance or the French Revolution, but also of the twentieth century. As Claeys's study shows, concepts of utopia and dystopia developed further in the twentieth century and, particularly with the development of totalitarianism, the adjective 'dystopian' came to indicate a failed utopia not only as its opposite term, but rather as a frightful degeneration of society.[65]

1.3. Dystopia and apocalypse: characteristics and imagery of a genre that shaped Mary Shelley's viewpoint

The conceptual and historical evolution of utopian and apocalyptic belief seen so far has placed these concepts in juxtaposition, creating a dialectal relationship in the literary tradition that eventually led to the development of the twentieth century dystopian concept. Numerous novels conceived in this area of interest demonstrate that utopia, dystopia, and apocalyptic writing have been considered as the most suitable means to convey major aspirations of perfection and anxieties about the end of humankind, as these themes are intrinsically connected to the history of man. Mary Shelley belongs to this landscape, too; through her writing, she successfully expressed her own

[62] "Dystopian fiction", *The International Anthony Burgess Foundation*, 2026. www.anthonyburgess.org/twentieth-century-dystopian-fiction/. Accessed May 15th, 2026.
[63] Vieira, Op. cit., p. 16.
[64] Claeys, G. "The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell", cit., p. 107.
[65] Claeys, G. *Dystopia: A Natural History*. *A study of modern despotism, its antecedents, and its literary diffractions*, cit, p. 5.

personal anxieties, as well as being able to offer a conscious critique of the ideologies and philosophical thoughts of her era.

As Claeys asserts, nowadays utopian literature as a genre encompasses a wider and diverse domain, originating from classical mythology and philosophy, and including fantastic voyages, inhabited planets and satire upon imaginary socio-political systems.[66] However, it is worth noting that, although science fiction works follow specific literary conventions, including utopian and dystopian elements, the notions of 'utopia' and 'dystopia' instead are subjected to the arbitrary interpretation of the individuals, therefore what they represent vary according to the historical time. As Claeys asserts, "the concept of utopia in every age is some variation of an ideal present, an ideal past and an ideal future, and the relation between the three. Each of these may be mythical or imaginary, or have some actual foundation in history."[67] Taking into account *Utopia*, for instance, the society depicted by More is indeed an improved, democratic society, with an economic system based on agriculture through which supplies are equally distributed among the population.[68] Yet, women's activities are restricted to taking care of the household, slavery is still permitted and death penalty is applied to punish those who try to usurp power.[69] Since these elements may be regarded as dystopian if conceived in a different historical period, More's utopian society illustrates Claeys's claim on the difficulty of giving a unique definition of both the notion of utopia and of the utopian genre. This is why Claeys argues that over time the concept of 'utopia' has acquired a paradoxical meaning, as it can potentially refer both to a 'good place' and a dismal place to be found everywhere.[70] As far as twentieth-century utopian fiction is concerned, then, it is characterized by a darker tendency towards a dystopian pessimism and "the fear that all utopianism somehow

[66] Claeys, G. (ed). *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*, p. 1.
[67] Claeys, G. *Utopia. The history of an idea*. London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd, 2020, p. 13.
[68] Ibid., pp. 56-58.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Clayes, G. (ed). *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*, cit., p. 1

eventuates in totalitarianism of one form or another."[71] Similarly, Baccolini and Moylan identify within twentieth century dystopian literature a concern with the representation of terrible worlds and pessimistic outcomes, despite maintaining an original utopian impulse.[72] Through this critical lens, it is apparent that modern dystopia has appropriated themes from literary utopia over the ages, adapting them to its specific historical context. Consequently, novels and stories conceived in different periods of time may share similar aims or perspectives. Just as modern dystopias such as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* can be regarded as a response to the twentieth-century political crises of totalitarianism, so too Mary Shelley's novels represent a reaction to the socio-political issues of her own time. Furthermore, it is also true that utopian literature has a variety of features that were later adapted to the needs of dystopian works. For instance, Baccolini and Moylan claim that "dystopian text usually begins directly in the terrible world"[73], the protagonist being immersed in an oppressive situation he or she has to confront. On the contrary, as Vieira observes, classical utopian literature originated after Thomas More in countries such as England, France, Italy and the United States presents a slightly different element, namely the protagonist's journey to an uncharted place, where the traveller learns about the new culture's organization from which he or she returns with an increased awareness that there are alternatives to improve society.[74] The narrative circle of departure and return, built around the anthropocentric idea of man at the centre of his own fate, is what positions utopian literature at the threshold between reality and imagination, acting as a critical mirror to the author's contemporary world.[75] Hence, utopian literature also operates as a speculative discourse on a non-existing, yet improved society, in which the human element is ever-present.[76] According to Vieira, utopian societies in literature are "human-centred,

[71] Ibid.
[72] Baccolini R., Moylan T., *Dark Horizons: science fiction and the dystopian imagination*. New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 5-7.
[73] Ibid., p. 5.
[74] Vieira, F., Op. cit., p. 7
[75] Ibid., p. 8.
[76] Ibid.

not relying on chance or on the intervention of external, divine forces in order to impose order on society. Utopian societies are built by human beings and are meant for them [...]."[77] As it will be discussed later, it is interesting to note that some of these features are also present in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man,* despite being explored through alternative lenses. For instance, in both novels the divine element is almost completely dismissed: human beings are the cause of their own suffering, as in the case of Victor Frankenstein's downfall; even the plague in *The Last Man* appears to be a secular phenomenon, rather than an instrument of divine retribution. Additionally, in both novels the protagonists embark on journeys toward unknown lands, both by land and seas: *Frankenstein* begins with Robert Walton's account on his sea voyage to the North Pole, followed by the creature's crossing of the terrible and sublime glaciers in Switzerland, while Victor too is required to travel in frightful conditions searching for his vengeance. In *The Last Man,* Lord Raymond decides to fight against the Turks in Constantinople, later followed by his companions. Additionally, in the third volume of the novel, Lionel Verney and his remaining family members are forced to abandon England to escape the plague, embarking on a perilous journey across Europe that culminates in Verney's solitary days in Rome. However, neither text offer the ideal depiction of a better society as expressed in the typical utopian imagery, as they both underscore the impossibility for human improvement. In *Frankenstein,* Victor Frankenstein's inner circle remains strictly confined to his university professors, his family members and friends, while the creature's attempts to integrate into the type of society exemplified by the De Lacey family result in a violent rejection. In *The Last Man,* what the reader witnesses is not only the downfall of Lionel Verney's domestic circle, but also the collapse of the entire social and political institutions in the face of the plague, which functions as a levelling force of societal hierarchies. Under this perspective, the two novels reveal distinct dystopian elements, also sharing a connection with the conventions of the science fiction genre. In alignment with Claeys, Vieira recognizes that utopian

[77] Ibid.

literature has been influenced by a variety of genres, namely the novel, the journal and science fiction.[78] The influence of science fiction on both utopian and dystopian literature is so pervasive that the boundaries between the genres have blurred creating intertwined features. Considering the advent of science fiction, Vieira argues that although "it was not difficult to distinguish it from literature utopia, as the former made a clear investment in the imagination of a fantastic world brought about by scientific and technological progress [...] while the latter stayed focused on the description of the alternative ways of organizing the imagined societies"[79], in recent times science fiction has been permeated by socio-political concerns, "displaying a clear commitment to politics"[80], and creating long-lasting debates regarding their generical distinction[81], with Mary Shelley emerging as an emblematic author in this critical context.

Regarding the Apocalypse and its literature, Garrard claims that the apocalyptic narrative, which deeply influenced Romantic poetry as well, is also present in visual art, characterized by forceful and distorted imagery set against views of a transformed world, representing the theme of the monumental effort against the forces of good and evil.[82] Garrard notes that in this genre not only the 'unveiling' of a higher truth is emphasized, but it also entails characteristic elements of paranoia, violence, and "the extreme moral dualism that divides the world sharply into friend and enemy."[83] Such apocalyptic images possess an established tradition that spans both literature and visual arts in the form of catastrophic scenes and atmospheres. Specifically, as Irene Chayes underlines, the nineteenth century apocalyptic imagery was a way to respond to the historical crises of the time, departing from a purely theological framework of apocalypse. In this sense, she indicates Morton D. Paley's book *Apocalyptic Sublime* as the seminal work indicating the so-called

[78] Vieira, F., Op. cit., p. 7.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid., p. 8.
[81] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[82] Garrard, G., Op. cit., p. 86.
[83] Ibid.

"apocalyptic sublime" as the aesthetic which characterized the English painters and their works between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.[84] Drawing from Edmund Burke's formulation of the sublime "as a passion operating in a manner that resembles actual pain"[85], Paley observes that artists such as John Martin or J.M.W. Turner captured in their paintings apocalyptic images of death, struggle, destruction and isolation, which are realized in stark contrasts of dark and light to represent the bridge between the human and the apocalypse "by showing divine forces virtually breaking through nature"[86], as in the case of Turner's *Deluge* (1805). It is true that these artists represented scenes inspired by the Book of Revelation; however, Paley suggests that the apocalyptic views in painting and literature shifted during the romantic period "in terms of preoccupations with the apocalyptic myth. Shared by poets and painters, this preoccupation is [...] with history (the creation of a new history) and with poetics (the formation of a new aesthetics)."[87] In this regard, William Blake emerges as the prominent artist of the literary apocalyptic sublime, leveraging the apocalyptic dramatic potential within his poetic works.[88] This theme evolved significantly during time, transforming again in twentieth century literature. Clarifying this generic shift, Pitetti distinguishes between the apocalyptic and the post-apocalyptic modes, underlining that "at the core of postapocalyptic narrative is the recognition that there is no entirely new world, and that history can never be transcended or escaped"[89], a framework which can be highly instructive for the analysis of Shelley's *The Last Man*. Specifically, Pitetti argues that while apocalyptic narratives are founded on cataclysmic events aiming to illustrate a clear temporal rupture between the present and the future, the "post-apocalyptic narratives take up very similar

[84] Chayes, I. H., "Review: The Apocalyptic Sublime by Morton D. Paley", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol 21, n 1, 1987, p. 95.
[85] Paley, M., in Chayes, I. H., Op. cit., p. 95.
[86] Ibid., p. 96.
[87] Wittreich, J. "Morton D. Paley, The Apocalyptic Sublime". *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly,* vol 22, Issue 1, 1988, p. 21.
[88] Ibid., p. 23.
[89] Pitetti, C., Op. cit, p. 447.

events in order to demonstrate precisely the opposite, highlighting the various forms of adaptive continuity and survival that link the pre- and post-disaster worlds."[90] Indeed, this post-apocalyptic framework of temporal inescapability and survival is central to decoding Shelley's broader literary vision. By overthrowing the illusion of a total rupture, either via the scientific breakthrough in *Frankenstein* or the global existential crisis in *The Last Man*, the protagonists of these novels are imprisoned within an inescapable timeline where the past actively damages and reshapes the boundaries of survival. While the nineteenth century was a period of profound technological breakthroughs and complex progressive ideals, Shelley used these emerging anxieties to anticipate a darker trajectory that would be fully realized in the subsequent dystopian literature. Consequently, considering how nineteenth-century literature evolved into the twentieth century, Gordin, Tilley and Prakash argue that "whereas utopia takes us into a future and serves to indict the present, dystopia places us directly in a dark and depressing reality, conjuring up a terrifying future if we do not recognize and treat its symptoms in the here and now."[91]

Ultimately, when considering the defining characteristics of utopian, dystopian and apocalyptic literature specifically between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, it becomes clear that Mary Shelley's novels occupy a pivotal position within this genre. Hugh Luke, in his critical study titled *The Last Man: Mary Shelley's Myth of the Solitary* (1965), underlines thematic commonalities shared by *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*. In particular, he argues that:

> The two books [...] grow out of the tradition of the Gothic novel, although neither may accurately be classified as belonging to that genre. Both are animated by the same deep interest in the impact of scientific knowledge on human life and human institutions, an interest which Mary undoubtedly absorbed during her years with Shelley. And both,

[90] Ibid.
[91] Gordin, M. D., Tilley, H., Prakash, G., Op. cit, p. 2.

finally, are built on the same theme of human isolation, of the ineluctable separateness of the individual being.[92]

The techno-scientific consequences and the sense of existential solitude emphasized by Luke provide a reason for Shelley's enduring relevance and her innovative contributions to the developments of modern post-apocalyptic fiction. Crucially, as Pohl points out, there are no positive visions or possibilities for a future world in Mary Shelley's oeuvres. Indeed, Pohl defines the apocalyptic *The Last Man* as "a document of the post-French revolutionary disillusionment" that "mourns the corrosion of the revolutionary ideals by flaws of human nature. The novel clearly questions the Enlightenment faith in the inevitability of progress through individual and collective perfectibility."[93] Mary Shelley's critique of contemporary ideals, such as the Godwinian concept of perfectibility, is equally of major significance in *Frankenstein*. Indeed, Claeys asserts that *Frankenstein* functions not only as the founding work of science fiction as a literary genre, but it can also be seen as "partly a satire on the failed aspirations of the Revolution, heralding one of the key themes of late dystopian writing."[94] This thematic intersection of scientific ambition and societal failure is what defines the modern dystopian genre; as Claeys concludes, from Jonathan Swift onward "science, technology, utopia and dystopia move forward increasingly in tandem."[95]

After having traced a generic framework on utopian and dystopian literature, discussing implications about the variations of their conceptual meanings and the critical debate on these genres, the subsequent chapter will specifically focus on an analysis of *Frankenstein*, exploring how Shelley's anxieties take form within her first masterpiece.

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[92] Luke, H.J., Jr, "*The Last Man*: Mary Shelley's Myth of the Solitary". *Prairie Schooner*, vol 39, n 4, 1965, pp. 316-17.
[93] Pohl, N., Op. cit., p. 75.
[94] Claeys, G. (ed). *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*, cit, p. 110.
[95] Ibid.

CHAPTER TWO

"Once again I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper. I have an affection for it, for it was the offspring of happy days, when death and grief were but words, which found no echo in my heart."[96]

2.1 Introductory remarks on Romanticism and millenarianism

Historically, the repercussions of the Fall of the Bastille in 1789, followed by the execution of Louis XVI in 1793, had an unprecedented impact on whole Europe: between 1783 and 1815, several countries were involved in a series of revolutionary wars between the French republican power and the older monarchies.[97] Given the climate of turmoil of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, some innovative figures emerged in the intellectual and philosophical sphere of the time. One of these was Edmurd Burke (1729-1797), who highly contributed to a variety of debates in politics, philosophy and literature. As one of the forerunners of English Romanticism, Burke was a strong personality and was also part of the English Parliament as a member of the Whigs. With the publication of *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in 1790, Burke fiercely criticized the French Revolution and those who were in its favour, considering the political system of democracy "as a 'kind of political monster' that has always consumed those who created it."[98] In Burke's viewpoint, monarchy was the only form of government that was above individuals and therefore it could not be challenged.[99] His attack on the French Revolution and its consequences inflamed widespread debate in England, provoking the reaction of liberal thinkers, including William Godwin (1756-1836) and Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), Mary Shelley's parents. Mary Wollstonecraft responded to Burke's critical writing by publishing *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and attacking Burke's

[96] Shelley, M. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Edited by M.K. Joseph. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 10.
[97] Butler, M., Op. cit., p. 4.
[98] Mishra, Sunil Kumar, et al. "Themes of Trauma and Political Reflections in the Novels of Mary Shelley." *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2023, p. 326.
[99] Butler, M., Op. cit., p. 55.

ideas on monarchy and hereditary privilege, as well as the language he used.[100] Pohl further explores Mary Wollstonecraft's relevance in this context, by considering her commitment to civil rights that is evident in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* published two years later, which specifically focused on women's rights and education. Additionally, in response to Burke's treaty, Godwin published the seminal work *An Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793)*,* which was highly influential on themes of morals and happiness, playing a role also on Mary Shelley's education. Contrary to Burke, who believed that injustice existed only among those who rebelled against the hierarchical structure of the monarchy, Godwin believed that "injustice, inequality, and poverty were rooted in social structures."[101] Embracing the atheistic viewpoint that human behaviour was to be analysed and determined by the proceeding of scientific laws,[102] Godwin was a firm believer that the political institutions of that time "failed to produce happiness, equality and freedom."[103] Indeed, Godwin's great ambition was to realize political justice in society through reason. That is to say, to use the exercise of reason and judgement as tools that enable the individuals to emancipate themselves from the political institutions and the government,[104] reinforcing his central ideas about how political institutions and monarchy indeed hinder the development of both the individual and the society.

This climate of change and revolutionary initiatives did not apply only to politics, philosophy or to the economic and industrial expansion, but it also pertained to the artistic and literary scene. As Butler states, "since culture is a way of expressing experience, we should expect to find these tensions, conflicts and signs of transition reflected in the arts. [...] The arts, including literature, also by general consent underwent a profound transformation."[105] From a literary viewpoint, Burke was influential

[100] Pohl, N., Op. cit., p. 72.
[101] Mishra, Sunil Kumar, et al. Op. cit., p. 327.
[102] Williams, J., *Mary Shelley, A literary life.* MacMillan Press. Houndsmills Basingstoke Hampshire and London, 2000, p. 13.
[103] Pohl, N., Op. cit., p. 72.
[104] Clemit, P., "*Frankenstein*, *Matilda*, and the legacies of Godwin and Wollstonecraft", in E. Schor (eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 28.
[105] Butler, M., Op. cit., p. 4.

for his aesthetic essay *A philosophical enquiry into the origins of our ideas of the sublime and beauty* (1757), in which he theorized the concepts of beauty and sublime as two distinguished notions. In so doing, Burke offered specific instances of the sublime that established the conventions to the Gothic novel, such as "raging storms, lofty towers, dark nights, [...] madmen; mountains, [...] intermittent sounds, such as moans, sighs, immense, gloomy buildings; tyranny, incarceration, torture."[106] These elements are characteristic of the Gothic fiction which was introduced by the end of the eighteenth century with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and further developed by Anne Radcliff's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Hence, Gothic novels expressed intense emotions by a deliberate use of terror and powerful feelings, leading the broader artistic and literary movement of Romanticism, considered by Maria del Pilar Bravo as a deliberate reaction against the rigid rationality of Enlightenment, as argued in her study *Literary creation and the supernatural in English romanticism* (2007). Defining Romanticism as a "renewing force for literature", Bravo argues that both in England and in the rest of Europe "this spiritual and artistic movement strongly rejected rationalism as a constraint for imagination, creativity and artistic autonomy."[107] More specifically, the notion of "creation as an artist's natural gift"[108] was central to English Romanticism, since it gave the opportunity "to each painter, writer, sculptor [...] to construct his own world by means of his own imagination."[109] Consequently, elements of imagination and the supernatural are present in the poems of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and Keats, as well as in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. These poets, according to Bravo, renounced the idea of humanity as the centre of the understanding of the world, since "they came to understand human beings, as well as their own experiences, as just one more component of that great source of life and creativity: Nature."[110]

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[106] Morris, D. B., "Gothic Sublimity." *New Literary History*, vol. 16, no. 2, 1985, pp. 300-301.

[107] Bravo, M. d.P., "Literary creation and the supernatural in English romanticism." in *Gist: Education and Learning Research Journal,* 1, 2007, p. 139.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Ibid.

However, as Romanticism escapes a unique definition given its diverse variations across Europe, within the English tradition Butler notes that, following the atmosphere of revolutions, some terms specifically related to political events entered the language of literature of the time, with expressions such as "the Romantic Rebellion", "the Romantic Revolution" or "the earthquake that was Romanticism", symbolizing therefore a close bond with the French Revolution and with the idea of radical transformation.[111] In slight contrast to Bravo's analysis, which emphasises the imaginative and supernatural interest of the Romantics, Butler notes that "the era of the young Romantics"[112] at the beginning of the nineteenth century was also characterized by a preoccupation with the aftermath of the Revolution. For this reason, Butler claims that Romantic poetry was revolutionary in nature, as it explored the perspectives of the middle classes, whom Butler describes as the Revolution's potential victims.[113] It is worth clarifying that the French Revolution was indeed a bourgeois revolution. Butler's argument, however, operates at a different level, taking into account the shift in literary sensibility between the two generations of Romantic poets. The younger Romantics turned their attention toward the damage inflicted by the Revolution on the individuals, rather than celebrating its rhetoric as an historical change. Middle class intellectuals and poets, then, being mostly liberals, are considered by Butler 'potential victims', since, writing in a period of political uncertainties in England at the turn of the nineteenth century, they felt vulnerable to the state of violence that emerged after the French Revolution. Hence, differentiating themselves from the first generation of Romantics, formed by Wordsworth and Coleridge, the second generation, which included Byron, Percy B. Shelley and Keats, responded to the new post-war circumstances in a different mode. Having witnessed the violent turn of events of the Reign of Terror and the Napoleonic wars, the young Romantics were confronted with an individual form of alienation in their poems. Despite remaining steadfast in their revolutionary principles, they became worried about the impacts of political violence. In such a

[111] Butler, M. Op. cit, p. 4.
[112] Ibid., p. 148.
[113] Ibid.

context, as argued by Butler, the second generation of Romantics developed a new literary perspective to confront post-war England's circumstances. In particular Percy Shelley could not ignore the issues "posed by the alienated consciousness [more] than any post-Enlightenment writer has been able to do."[114] Butler points out that Percy B. Shelley more than any other of his contemporaries seemed to project in his works "the scientist's universe: atomistic and fluid, driven by natural forces of wind and tide, electricity and volcanic eruptions."[115] It is in this climate of scientific curiosity and disillusionment of revolutionary ideals that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* emerges as an anti-Romantic critique, as Mary Shelley exposed the limitations of the Romantic ideals deriving from the French Revolution, which were supported by her father and her Romantic colleagues. From Mary Shelley's critical stance, the novel's dystopian and apocalyptic elements spring in the reinterpretation of the Promethean hero, who is depicted as a cautionary symbol of unchecked ambition, rather than a Romantic revolutionary hero.

Romantic poetry was affected by Godwin's groundbreaking ideals in the philosophic and literary sphere, as Pohl considers the Romantic movement "a form of utopian displacement"[116], aiming to free itself from oppressive hierarchical systems in order to achieve a more just and egalitarian society. For this reason, Romantic poetry expresses itself "in a variety of visions such as the pastoral, agrarian utopians, prophetic art [or] creativity, and onto the 'New World'."[117] The shift toward the inner self and the growing interest in natural beauty intertwined with the broader utopian and apocalyptic anxieties of the era, mirroring indeed the literary responses that were emerging as a reaction to the Reign of Terror which followed the French Revolution. In fact, as Bravo argues, the Romantics used these themes to convey a specific connotation of apocalypse within their poetry, with poems presenting common reflections on the rebirth of 'a new man'. Blake, for instance, saw the

[114] Ibid., p. 185.
[115] Ibid., p. 124.
[116] Pohl, N., Op. cit., p. 72.
[117] Ibid.

apocalypse as "the need to die from ignorance and to be reborn to be able to create, to imagine."[118] Drawing inspiration from divine and horrific figures mirrored after biblical episodes to convey his apocalyptic vision,[119] Blake's poetry expresses his desire to be "reborn with a new capacity to see things in a new perspective, 'infinite as they are.'"[120]

For the Romantics, then, the apocalypse developed into a personal dimension, characterized by the individual rebirth and the cultivation of a new perspective through imagination. The recurrent theme of rebirth and 'a new man' in poetry also mirrored the philosophical ideals of contemporary intellectuals. Consequently, both Romantic poets and such intellectuals as Godwin shared a common vision in apocalyptic terms, that is "the birth of a new man and the coming of a new era."[121] According to Vieira, what is significant about their shared viewpoint is the fact that the new man conceptualized by these authors was not seen in the solitary dimension of his life on a remote island, as in the case of More's *Utopia*. Instead, the new man would rather live "in the real, historical world of the future"[122], leading Vieira to conclude that with such authors, including Godwin, the "British utopian thought thus became truly chronic."[123]

With the unfolding of the French Revolution, fears of apocalypse continued to proliferate, serving not merely a religious purpose, but also as a way of making sense of humankind's position in the world. Bridging religious tradition and radical politics, millenarianism flourished between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century as a belief in the radical transformation of society and the imminent arrival of the New Jerusalem as predicted in the Bible.[124] Indeed, millenarianism also expanded in the political sphere, intertwining biblical expectations with more contemporary events. As argued by Fulford, "Millenarianism was not an addition to radical politics

[118] Bravo, M. d. P., Op. cit., p. 142.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Vieira, F., Op. cit., p. 13.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Fulford, T. (ed.) *Romanticism and Millenarianism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 1.

but one of the principal discourses in which that politics was formulated [...] for respectable middle-class dissenters."[125] Followers of millenarianism would gather in groups and new dissenting churches expanded, as the example of a millenarian religious group formed in London in the last decades of the eighteenth century, which gathered under the influence of the Swedish philosopher Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772).[126] Moreover, those who believed in millenarianism also believed in the transformation of the corrupted world into the reign of Christ, as "after a thousand years of Christ's kingdom on earth, judgement and apocalypse would occur."[127] Under this perspective, the millenarian belief echoes the original revelatory dimension of apocalypse, and with the coming of the divine reign of Christ as the long-awaited disclosure of a divine plan. Millenarian belief also influenced the expectations of writers and artists such as Blake, Wordsworth and Coleridge,[128] shaping thereby the imagery of Romantic art and literature. Fulford asserts that apocalyptic prophecies and millenarian visions circulated in the broader Romantic literary circle; particularly Wordsworth, Percy B. Shelley and Godwin presented a secularized version of the thousand-year divine reign of Christ, whilst "Byron and Mary Shelley imagined apocalyptic destruction."[129] Romantic poets, however, expressed apocalyptic imagery in different ways, drawing on Blake and Milton as shared sources of inspiration. This mode of apocalyptic thinking, for instance, can be seen in Mellor's reading of Percy B. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* as the celebration of the capacity of "poetic language to transform and redeem human consciousness."[130] In this regard, the apocalypse turns into a more personal and intimate dimension, in contrast to millenarianism, which considered the apocalypse in terms of great revolutionary ideals and the coming of a new age. Interestingly, Mellor points out a difference of

[125] Ibid., p. 3. Fulford also cites the example of Richard Paine as one of the dissenters who interpreted the French Revolution in biblical terms. In one of his sermons in the London Revolutionary Society, Paine imagined the revolutionary era as the fulfilment of Daniel's prophecy about the coming of a new monarchy, "ruled by the Son of Man."
[126] Butler, M., Op. cit., p. 46.
[127] Fulford, T., Op. cit., p. 1.
[128] Ibid., p. 2
[129] Fulford, T., Op. cit., p. 13.
[130] Mellor, A. K. "Blake, the Apocalypse and Romantic Women Writers", in Fulford, T. (ed.) *Romanticism and Millenarianism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 140.

apocalyptic vision between the first and the second generation of Romantics. While Wordsworth, Coleridge and Percy B. Shelley shared "Milton's commitment to apocalyptic thinking",[131] responding positively to the apocalyptic imagery of the end of the century, on the contrary "negative visions were articulated by Byron's *Darkness* (1816)."[132] Moreover, Mellor also differentiates Mary Shelley's vision of the apocalyptic theme from her contemporary male authors, arguing that if on the one hand "Blake, Byron, and Shelley revised Milton's epic by aligning themselves with the revolutionary energies of Satan",[133] the author of *Frankenstein*, on the other hand, is concerned with exploring "the ambiguities of the fallen conditions, whether human or Satanic"[134], which can be observed in the frequent associations between the characters of Victor Frankenstein and his creature and Milton's Satan.

Drawing on Garrard's conceptualization of apocalyptic writing as a response to periods of profound historical crisis, Romantic poetry may also be considered apocalyptic within this framework, as it was born out of a challenging and innovative epoch in which writers and poets felt themselves deeply engaged in the socio-political transformations of their time. Chris Washington, in his essential study *Romantic Revelations, Visions of Post-Apocalyptic Life and Hope in the Anthropocene* (2019), explores the relation among Romantic literature, the apocalyptic framework and the debate on the Anthropocene understood as the set of human activities which modify the Earth's ecosystem. By taking into account eighteenth and nineteenth-century preoccupations with the end of humanity and arguing that Romantic texts "work counter-intuitively and paradoxically, facing down extinction as the limit of life to show that it is this very extinctual limit that makes life possible",[135] Washington claims that Romanticism operates a distinction between the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic, which

[131] Ibid., p. 139.
[132] Ibid., p. 140.
[133] Mellor, A. K., "Making a monster: an introduction to Frankenstein", in Schor, E. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Companions to Literature), 2003, p. 23.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Washington, C., *Romantic Revelation, Visions of Post-Apocalyptic Life and Hope in the Anthropocene.* University of Toronto Press, 2019, p. 5.

"engenders hope rather than despair."[136] In this context, Romantic poets and writers try to investigate a world without human beings and some of them, such as Percy B. Shelley, considered themselves as prophets. In fact, Percy B. Shelley had a precise idea about the role of the poets as "the unacknowledged legislators, not because they make something new but because they reveal a heretofore-unknown truth of the universe."[137] Using imagination as a means to "give the human mind relief from the saturation of moral and social patterns and taboos",[138] Percy B. Shelley's implication of poetry requires to have "imaginative sympathy [...] placing oneself imaginatively in the bodies of the rest of the species."[139] From this perspective, Washington observes that for Percy B. Shelley poetry constituted "both a revelation (*apocalypsis*) and a concealing",[140] revealing thereby a complex and ambivalent value in its apocalyptic interpretation.

This same contrast between disclosure and concealment is also present in Mary Shelley's life and literary understanding. As far as Mary and her family are concerned, Williams argues that "the contrasting lives" led by William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, as well as their intellectual fame and reputation as subversive thinkers, left an evident mark on Mary. Godwin was raised in a Calvinist family, before entering the intellectual dissenting circles and the world of radical journalism, while Mary Wollstonecraft led a tormented personal life: she had an affair with the American writer and diplomat Gilbert Imlay, with whom she had a daughter, Fanny, and she attempted suicide twice.[141] After Mary Wollstonecraft's death, Godwin took care of the household and the children, including Fanny. Due to his background as Protestant dissenter, education was at the forefront "as the key to

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[136] Ibid.

[137] Ibid., p. 60.

[138] Bravo, M. d.P., Op. cit., p. 139.

[139] Washington, C., Op. cit., p. 60. Additionally, Harold Bloom, taking into account both the Romantic relation with nature and the attitude of the alchemist, which is pivotal in *Frankenstein*, further argues that "along with this Romantic concept of the union of self and Nature was the idea that what is internal in the individual is externally revealed in Nature and, thus, the alchemist's early attempts to perfect Nature were seen as analogous to the Romantic notion of a redeemed selfhood, a process wholly internalized within the imagination." Bloom, H., *Bloom's Guides: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.* New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007, pp. 62-63.

[140] Washington, C., Op. cit., p. 57.

[141] Williams, J., Op. cit., p. 16.

social change"[142] for Godwin, whose attention "on education remained constant, pervading the lives of all the children in the household."[143] It is because of Godwin's sophisticated pedagogical methods that Mary Shelley could access a variety of texts, from classical literature to scientific treaties, including her own father's reformist works of history and English grammar.[144] Clemit underlines the importance of Mary Shelley's early readings as an unusual yet broad source of intellectual and literary education; not only did Godwin formulate an innovative literary approach and a writing mode designed to foster the children's independent thinking,[145] but he also encouraged his children to attend cultural events such as public lectures, theatrical representations and art galleries "to meet the many distinguished writers, artists, scientists, and medical men."[146] For this reason, Mary also had the opportunity to meet some of the main literary figures who attended Godwin's house, beholding the many debates he was used to carry on "political, philosophical, scientific, or literary conversations with such visitors as William Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, Samuel Coleridge, [...] Humphrey Davy [...] and William Hazlitt."[147] In one such occasion, while still a child, Coleridge recited in front of her the canonical poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.* According to Mellor, this event represented a crucial moment for Mary's development of literary imagination. This is due in particular to the fact that "the image of the isolated, tormented old Mariner would haunt her own fiction, even as Coleridge's verses reverberate through *Frankenstein* and *Falkner*."[148] For instance, in the second letter addressed to his sister, in *Frankenstein*'s opening, the explorer Robert Walton directly quotes *The Rime* when referring to his great enterprise of travelling to the northern regions of the world: "I am going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of mist and snow' but I shall kill no albatross, therefore

[142] Clemit, P., Op. cit. p. 29.
[143] Bennett, B.T., "Mary Shelley's letters: the public/ private self", in Schor, E. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 213.
[144] Clemit, P., Op. cit., p. 29.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Ibid.
[147] Mellor, A. K. *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters*. Routledge: New York, 1988, p. 11.
[148] Ibid.

do not be alarmed for my safety."[149] Coleridge's poem is cited by Walton as a cautionary tale: despite his will to conquer the unknown, he believes he can avoid the tragic Mariner's fate. However, as the story unfolds, Victor Frankenstein will eventually identify himself with the Mariner's ill-starred ending, haunted by the consequences of his ambition.

Moreover, the time Mary spent in Scotland with the Baxter family was essential for her formative years. As Bloom underlines, in Scotland she was introduced to the local tradition and mythology, being encouraged to write stories.[150] In describing her early inclinations to writing stories, Mary herself in the 1831 introduction to *Frankenstein* recollected the time spent in Scotland, "on the blank and dreary northern shores of the Tay, near Dundee."[151] She linked in particular her inspiration and imagination to the Scottish natural landscapes, describing how they could foster beneath "the trees of the grounds"[152] of her house or "on the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near."[153]

Similarly to Mellor, Spark too underscores the importance of Godwin's intellectual meetings for the formation of Mary Shelley. Godwin's and Coleridge's ideas can thereby be found in *Frankenstein* specifically because Mary's father represented "the scientific empiricism of the previous century" whilst Coleridge, in turn, represented "the nineteenth century's imaginative reaction."[154] In this regard, educated to embrace William Godwin's and Mary Wollstonecraft's "central belief in the duty of engagement in public debate on all pertinent moral, social, and political issues as a means of contributing to the general welfare"[155], Mary Shelley was aware of the influence her parents' writings had both on her personal life and her understanding of the world, and she was able to broaden and rethink "the many-sided legacies of Godwin and Wollstonecraft in extreme, imaginatively arresting

[149] Shelley, M. Op. cit., p. 21.
[150] Bloom, H., *Bloom's Guides: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.* New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007, p. 12.
[151] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 6.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid.
[154] Spark, M., *Mary Shelley*. London: Constable and Company, 1988, p. 159.
[155] Clemit, P., Op. cit., p. 28.

ways"[156] due to her atypical education. This was an aspect that fascinated Percy B. Shelley, who also greatly admired Godwin, as well: in fact, he attended Godwin's house and became one of his disciples. *Political Justice,* in particular, helped shape Percy Shelley's political philosophy due to three main fields on enquiry that became central to the poet's thought: "Godwin's insistence on the connection between politics and morality; his belief in the individual's potential for rational improvement; and his attacks on monarchy, aristocracy, and all the forms of internalized values"[157], as Clemit asserts.

However, beyond her parents' intellectual legacy, Mary Shelley's life was shaped by a series of tragic events, as she had to face death from an early age and her own experience of motherhood marked her profoundly. As Britton notes, her first child, a girl, was born prematurely and died only a few days after. Mary reported this event in her personal journal in 1815, describing it as a touching vision in her dreams, and expressing her ardent desire of returning the baby back to life.[158] Eventually, it is this recurrent dream that, almost like a premonition, became the source for the main idea of *Frankenstein* "I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might, in the process of time, renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption."[159] This first loss was followed by the deaths of two of her other children, Clara and William. As Ferguson Ellis observes, between 1818 and 1819 these unfortunate events presented to Mary "an almost excessive list of provocations for Shelley's anger and grief."[160] Yet, despite the grief for the losses of her children and the resulting sentimental fracture with her husband, the bond between Mary and Percy extended into a profound intellectual partnership that sustained Mary throughout her life, lasting even after Percy's tragic drowning in 1822. In fact, they intensely shared readings "documenting their progress in a

[156] Ibid., p. 26.
[157] Ibid., p. 29.
[158] Britton, R., "Mary Shelley's Frankenstein: what made the Monster monstrous?" *The Journal of analytical psychology*, 60(1), 2015, p. 4.
[159] Moers, E., 2012, p. 324, as cited in Britton, R., Op. cit., p. 4.
[160] Ferguson Ellis, K., "Subversive surfaces: the limits of domestic affection in Mary Shelley's later fiction", in Fisch, A., Mellor, A. K., Schor, E. H. (eds), *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1993, p. 229.

collaborative journal designed to emulate the intellectual reciprocity of Mary Shelley's parents"[161] and developing their own critical understanding of philosophy and historical events such as the French Revolution. Not only did they study Godwin's and Wollstonecraft's philosophical works, but they also expanded their knowledge studying counter-revolutionary theories and autobiographical writings of revolutionary leaders.[162] In particular, as Moskal points out, their re-evaluation of the French Revolution and the influence of Rousseau upon its long history is also evident in *Frankenstein,* since the protagonist "creates an image of humanity that, like the Revolution, begins in benevolence and ends in murder."[163] Through the confluence of both intellectual formation and personal loss, Mary Shelley was able to transform personal grief and her engagement with revolutionary thought into a broader reflection on creation and death, represented by *Frankenstein*.

2.2 *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*: between scientific hope and the failure of personal ambition

Apocalyptic visions in Romantic poetry were also influenced by the Renaissance poet John Milton (1608-1674), who was deeply admired during Romanticism[164], as Romantic poets drew on his foundational work, *Paradise Lost* (1667) to develop their own apocalyptic imagination. To underscore Milton's influence on Mary Shelley, it is helpful to consider *Frankenstein*'s subtitle, *The Modern Prometheus*, and the epigraph reporting some of the lines of *Paradise Lost* to introduce the subject matter of the novel. In fact, at the opening of the novel the following lines can be found: "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould Me man? Did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?"[165] Adam's accusing words against his creator in *Paradise Lost* may apply to both Victor Frankenstein

[161] Clemit, P., Op. cit., p. 30.
[162] Ibid.
[163] Moskal J., "Travel writing", in Schor, E. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 245.
[164]Kitson P. J., "To Milton's Trump": Coleridge's Unitarian Sublime and the Miltonic Apocalypse", in Fulford, Tim (ed.). Op. cit., p. 43.
[165] Milton, J., *Paradise Lost* [X. 743-5], in Shelley, M., Op. cit.

and his creature.[166] Through the parallelism between Adam and Satan, the relationship between the creator and his creation is explored in a double sense, as Victor Frankenstein and the creature appear in turn as hunter and hunted. References to Milton's work and to the creature's dual identification with both Adam and Satan are recurrent throughout the novel. For instance, in the crucial moment where they meet for the first time after Victor abandoned him, the creature asks Frankenstein to listen to his tale. When Victor declares with horror that he will not listen to him, the creature cries out "Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed"[167], alluding again to the epigraph of *Paradise Lost.*[168] Indeed, as Bloom maintains, "the bitter relationship between Victor Frankenstein and his daemon"[169] is at the heart of the novel. Bloom argues that "the monster sees himself in a Miltonic context, claiming that he has been forced to hate his 'creator', just as Lucifer had turned against God."[170]

The subtitle of the novel, *The Modern Prometheus*, is an element that has brought up the attention of scholars and critics for years. It has a profound symbolic meaning that relates both to the concept of the 'new man' developed by Godwin, and to a novelty in the association of the myth of creation connected with science. In his critical study of Mary Shelley's works, Bloom underscores the relevance of Prometheus in the broader context of Romantic literature and its characteristic mythology, arguing that "Prometheus is the mythic figure who best suits the uses of Romantic poetry, for no other traditional being has in him the full range of Romantic moral sensibility and the full Romantic capacity for creation and destruction."[171] The myth of Prometheus was frequently used in Romantic poetry; Byron, for instance, wrote a poem titled *Prometheus* in 1816, while Percy B. Shelley was the author of the lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Bloom asserts that one of the novel's

[166] Joseph, M. K., Introduction, in Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. xi.
[167] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 100.
[168] Bloom, H., *Bloom's Guides: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein,* cit., p. 7.
[169] Ibid.
[170] Ibid., p. 41.
[171] Bloom, H. (ed) *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. *(Modern Critical Interpretations).* New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, p. 2.

intent is to represent Victor Frankenstein as the modern Prometheus who steals the "creative fire from heaven in order to make a creature, a New Adam, whom most of us now call 'the monster'."[172] However, according to Mellor the subtitle can be considered as a critique of "both the promethean poets she knew best, Byron and Percy Shelley, and of the entire Romantic ideology as she [Mary] understood it"[173], merging the two most popular versions of the Promethean myth, Prometheus *plasticator* and Prometheus *pyrphoros*. Moreover, M.K. Joseph's analysis of the subtitle underlines its novelty in the way it was developed in *Frankenstein*, since Mary Shelley was the only one who "seized on the vital significance of making Prometheus the creator rather than, as in Byron and Shelley, the suffering champion of mankind."[174] Mary Shelley's great innovation, therefore, is to be found in her ability to link the Promethean myth with various scientific theories of her time, which proposed electricity as the source of the 'divine spark' of life.[175] It is telling therefore to read the novel's subtitle, *The modern Prometheus,* as an allusion or a warning to scientists who consider themselves to stand above human endeavours or above any limit. It can be considered as a framework that guides the reader as the story unfolds, allowing reflections on the connection between the Promethean myth and the scientific ambition that characterizes Victor. Indeed, *Frankenstein* has long been interpreted and analysed under the lens of science and the danger of overly emphasized scientific ambition. The reference to the Godwinian ideals of perfectibility and human progress is evident throughout the novel, which also contains the dedication to Mary Shelley's father. As one of the novel's central themes, Victor's experiment as the attempt to create a "new species" has often been read "as a specific critic of Godwin's utopian idealism, as set out in the first edition of *Political Justice.*"[176]

Mary Shelley spent the summer of 1816 at Villa Diodati in Geneva. Together with Percy

[172] Bloom, H., *Bloom's Guides: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein,* cit, p. 7.
[173] Mellor, A. K., "On the Modern Prometheus", in Bloom H.*, Bloom's Guide: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein,* cit.*,* p. 78.
[174]Joseph, M.K., Introduction, Op. cit, p. vii.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Clemit, P., Op. cit., p. 31.

Shelley, John Polidori and Lord Byron, Mary had the opportunity to discuss a variety of themes, from contemporary science to the Promethean myth, also developing her own understanding and sensibility of these topics. As she herself explained in her 1831 introduction to the novel, while amusing themselves in reading ghost stories, Byron engaged the group in a writing competition. It was on this occasion that she had the inspiration to write *Frankenstein*:

> For supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handy-work, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade.[177]

As this passage from the introduction of *Frankenstein* shows, one night Mary had a feverish nightmare, which became the source of inspiration for the novel. Excited by the conversations between Byron and Shelley on new scientific perspectives such as galvanism and on philosophical issues, including the principle of life, Mary Shelley was inspired by what she described to be an "acute mental vision", in which she vividly saw "the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together"[178], and the same 'thing' coming to life "on the working of some powerful engine."[179] The nightmare was so terrifying to Mary that she decided to write about it in her ghost story for Byron's literary competition, later encouraged by Percy to develop the full tale. Her vision was interspersed by feelings of terror due to the protagonist's will to imitate the act of creation, even though with dreadful results. Mary Shelley used the term 'spark of life' with a precise aim, and this term also recurs when Victor explains how the creature comes to life: "I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet [...] by

[177] Shelley, M. Op. cit., p. 9.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.

the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs."[180]

This recalls a common scientific practice of the time. In fact, between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century, discourses on galvanism, electricity and magnetism were common in the scientific debate. Investigating the use of monstrous motifs in science fiction and the role of literature within the framework of the governance of new technologies, Shannon N. Conley reports Giovanni Aldini's 1803 experiment at the Royal College of Surgeons as the "birthplace of the *Frankenstein* motif, an image that would ultimately come to represent science as a runaway force, as innovation out of control."[181] During the demonstration, Aldini applied electricity to a corpse, making it convulse and move as if it was alive. This experiment was part of the emerging science known as galvanism, which brought up the attention on the responsibility of scientists, questioning whether these experiments were an attempt to control nature by trying to awaken the dead or if they could actually represent an important benefit for society.[182] Debate on the legitimacy or illegitimacy of this scientific practice "was headed by renowned chemist Sir Humphry Davy, a friend of Mary Shelley."[183] Mary eventually learnt about the scientific parallel of the divine spark of life as the animating force from Percy Shelley[184], and about experiments with electricity on corpses from Davy, as he recounted them "in vivid detail to her over a decade later."[185] Percy and Mary shared a common interest in science, as well as considering scientific experimentation as an equivalent to the political one, as both subjects "offered the means to create a better world."[186] Additionally, as attested in the 1831 introduction, Mary Shelley reported having listened to Byron and Shelley's conversations on the principle of life,

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[180] Ibid., pp. 8-9.

[181] Conley, S.N., "An age of *Frankenstein*: monstrous motifs, imaginative capacities, and assisted reproductive technologies." *Science fiction studies,* vol 45, 2018, p. 244.

[182] Ibid.

[183] Ibid., p. 248.

[184] Joseph, M.K., Introduction, in Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. viii.

[185] Conley, S.N., Op. cit., p. 248.

[186] Bennett, T. B., "On the exercise of power and responsibility", in Bloom, H., *Bloom's guide: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.* cit., pp. 112-113.

learning about Erasmus Darwin's experiments.[187] Therefore, recollections of galvanism and experiments with corpses became the source of inspiration for a story that would "speak to the mysterious fears of our nature [...] Perhaps a corpse would be reanimated [...] the components parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together and endued with vital warmth."[188] Bennett further claims that Godwin himself may have instructed Mary on scientific matters due to his frequent conversations with William Nicholson on scientific issues, namely chemistry, physics, and natural sciences,[189] concluding that this type of scientific exploration represented for Mary "a ready contemporary paradigm for examining contemporary political inequities."[190]

The novel presents itself with a layered structure, characterized by three narrators: Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein, and the creature.[191] Robert Walton's letters to his sister introduce the reader to a series of eerie events. During an expedition to the North Pole, Walton and his companions see a strange, gloomy figure at a distance; shortly after Victor Frankenstein arrives at Walton's ship, half frozen and frightened. This is the moment in which the fates of the two characters merge as Victor starts narrating his tale. Coming from a nurturing family, Victor presents himself as a young, enthusiastic student of occult studies first, turning in a second moment to the natural sciences at the University of Ingolstadt. Since an early age, he has felt a deep desire to know the secrets of nature, as he affirms: "Curiosity, earnest research to learn the hidden laws of nature [...] are among the earliest sensations I can remember."[192] Victor's own characterization of his studies is relevant to understanding his project of creating a 'new man'. Bloom notes that, despite an apparent idyllic

[187] Shelley, M. Op. cit., p. 8.
[188] Ibid., pp. 8-9.
[189] Bennett, T. B., "On the exercise of power and responsibility", cit., pp. 112-113.
[190] Ibid.
[191] Britton interestingly interprets the three narrators as representative of Mary Shelley and her contact persons: "Robert Walton, intrepid, arctic adventurer, is an old daydream character from her childhood years in Scotland. Victor Frankenstein, the second narrator and the new Prometheus, is modelled on Shelley, Byron and William Lawrence, the controversial professor of evolutionary anatomy. The third and by far the most eloquent voice is that of the Monster and he speaks for Mary's unconscious, saying things she does not really know about herself." Britton, R. Op. cit., p. 7
[192] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 36.

childhood, “a sinister note” is introduced when Victor displays his interest for alchemy and the occult. Victor cites the studies of important figures of the past, “the lords of his imagination”[193], whose works fascinated and instructed him on alchemy, the occult, chemistry and medicine[194]: the alchemist Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), who was also reputed to be concerned with the occult, the German philosopher Albertus Magnus (1234-1314) and the Swiss physician Paracelsus (1493-1541). Victor’s studies of these disciplines resulted in his growing preoccupation with “discovering the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life. Victor became enthralled with a passion for probing the secrets of nature”[195], therefore confirming the desire he has felt since childhood. At the university, Victor Frankenstein meets two professors who significantly guide him in his formation and his further interest in science. M. Krempe is the first professor he encounters, and, as a convinced follower of the Enlightenment, he insists that Victor should abandon alchemy, embracing instead “modern natural philosophy.”[196] Shortly after, Victor meets Professor Waldman, described in stark contrast to M. Krempe, and he is swiftly captivated by him. Bloom points out that “most appealing to Victor, however, was Waldman’s enthusiasm for the modern philosophers who delved “ ‘into the recesses of nature’.”[197] In particular, Waldman’s portrayal of modern scientists as figures capable of mocking “the invisible world with its own shadows”[198] is a perspective that profoundly appeals to Victor,[199] representing therefore “the Romantic scientist who unifies ancient and modern knowledge.”[200] Similarly, Spark sees Waldman’s lecture on chemistry as the turning point that animates Victor’s enthusiasm for scientific mastery.[201] In fact, Waldman states that the modern scientists can “penetrate

[193] Ibid., p. 41.
[194] Bloom, H., *Bloom’s Guides: Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, cit., pp.31-32.
[195] Ibid.
[196] McLarren Caldwell, J., “On Sympathy and similitude”, in Bloom, H., *Bloom’s Guides: Frankenstein.* New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007, p. 130.
[197] Bloom, H., *Bloom’s Guides: Frankenstein.* New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007, p. 33.
[198] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 48.
[199] Bloom, H., Op. cit., p. 33.
[200] McLarren Caldwell, J., Op. cit., p. 130.
[201] Spark, M., *Mary Shelley*. London: Constable and Company, 1988, p. 175.

into the recesses of nature and show how she works in her hiding-places. They ascend into the heavens; they have discovered how the blood circulates, and the nature of the air we breathe. They have acquired new and almost unlimited powers."[202] This is the moment in which Victor feels completely bewitched by the power of this practice, and in realizing it he describes what he feels as follows: "I felt as if my soul were grappling with a palpable enemy [...] Thus ended a day memorable to me: it decided my future destiny."[203] Consequently, Victor spends about two years in his laboratory doing experiments and improvements, fascinated by the structure of both the human and the animal body, driven by the bold curiosity to discover whence the principle of life proceeds, and as a consequence being attracted to deepening his knowledge of anatomy and physiology.[204] As Bloom notes, "studying the minute details and changes that accompany death, a lurid task reminiscent of the Gothic novels"[205], Victor's hybris prevails when he convinces himself he is the scientist who can "bestow animation upon lifeless matter"[206], hence renewing life "where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption."[207] As Victor's ultimate aim is to "wrest the secret of immortality"[208] through the union of his imagination and his application to science, he begins to create a new being in his laboratory. As he proudly declares: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs."[209] However, notably described by Victor as a revolting being, the creature does not embody the ideals of perfectibility discussed by philosophers and writers such as Godwin. On the contrary, he becomes a symbol of the tragic outcomes of scientific progress and an embodiment of Victor's worst fears of evil. In the most typical gothic atmosphere, during a

[202] Shelley, M. Op. cit., p. 48.
[203] Ibid., pp. 48-49.
[204] Ibid., p. 51.
[205] Bloom, H., *Bloom's Guides: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein,* cit., p. 34.
[206] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 54.
[207] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 54.
[208]Bloom, H., *Bloom's Guides: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein,* cit., p. 34.
[209] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 54.

"dreary night of November"[210] Victor Frankenstein is able to animate the creature. However, despite having carefully chosen the limbs to form the body, the result horrifies the scientist, as it can be inferred from this passage:

> 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 black lips.[211]

As a consequence of his horror and disgust for what he created, Victor flees the laboratory, leaving the creature immediately after his 'birth'.[212] This moment inevitably marks the downfall of the scientist. Tatar analyses this passage as the moment in which Victor "regrets relying too strictly on science and knowledge"[213]: not only does Victor lose interest in science, but more importantly he despises his own creation as a possible criminal due to his monstrous aspect.[214] Victor's perception is rooted in the material composition of the creature's body. In fact, the scientist gathers limbs and organic material from slaughterhouses and dissecting rooms, the latter being the place where the remains of executed criminals were collected. Because the creator fails in taking responsibility for his own creation, then, his fate is bound to the creature seeking for revenge, which is a response to his primordial refusal and it is similar to the rejection the creature subsequently experiences with the De

[210] Ibid., p. 57.
[211] Ibid.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Tatar, S., "The Role of Science, Technology and Apocalypse in the Dystopian Fictions: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*.", *Cumhuriyet Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, vol 45, issue 1, 2021, p. 260.
[214] Ibid.

Laceys family.

Studying her father's works, as well as influential thinkers as Rousseau, Mary Shelley weaved notions of human perfectibility into *Frankenstein*, interrogating Enlightenment ideals through Victor's character, and ultimately developing critical ideas on moral limits and the consequences of unchecked ambition. Mellor's critical biography *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters* ascertains that "Shelley criticizes the scientific discoveries and increasingly technological advancements that were taking place in her own day, advocating instead a more humane, sympathetic, and nurturing use of science to improve human life."[215] Moreover, from the moment Victor abandons the creature, who is forced to learn how to survive by himself, the two characters are intertwined by a dynamic that scholars have interpreted as a pattern of pursuit. Drawing from Godwin's three-volume novel *Caleb Williams*, Mary Shelley elaborated and elevated this pattern in *Frankenstein*; as scholars such as Spark and Clemit underscore, the theme of pursuit is a relevant element for the development of the story. In fact, in identifying this theme as inspired by Godwin, Spark claims that "it is this theme that endows the novel, not only with movement, but with a pattern. [...] It begins at Chapter V with the creation of the Monster who becomes, within the first two pages, Frankenstein's pursuer."[216] Furthermore, Spark notes that Godwin's ideas permeate the novel. A representative example occurs when the creature recollects his process of self-education and improvement: by reading *Paradise Lost* and *Plutarch's Lives* and listening to the De Laceys conversations, he learns "of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid property; of rank, descent, and noble blood."[217] According to Spark, then, this passage echoes Godwinian ideas expressed in his works, so that "it is not surprising that Mary should be excited by a scientific and rational theme" since "this was the lesson Mary knew

[215] Mellor, A.K., *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters*, as cited in Long Hoeveler, D., "Frankenstein, feminism, and literary theory", in Schor, E. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 57.
[216] Spark, M., *Mary Shelley*, cit., p. 162.
[217] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 120.

by rote."[218] Similarly, Clemit claims the creature to possess a Godwinian logic, while also alluding to a Rousseauvian reading of him as an instance of the man in the state of nature. Indeed, she underscores in the creature's narration of his own story the strongest critique to the parental abandonment represented by Frankenstein's rejection, due to the fact that "in contrast to Frankenstein's melodramatic outburst, the creature's measured eloquence reflects a Rousseauvian sensibility, tempered by Godwinian logic."[219] Hence, despite his physical appearance being frightening, Bloom argues that the "quasimechanical being" created by the scientist possesses "an incredible sensitivity and intellect."[220] In fact, the creature learns how to survive in nature, eating berries and roots and discovering fire. Finding a cottage in the woods near the De Laceys' cottage, he learns about human relationships by observing them in secret, so he believes to have the opportunity to improve his situation to a certain extent. However, Washington interestingly draws a difference between the creature and the Rousseauvian man in the state of nature. In contrast to the Rousseauvian man, being painfully rejected by society, the creature is forced to live "as a solitary walker, one who differs from Rousseau in that he finds only misery and desolation in the natural world to which he is reduced for want of the social company he so desires."[221] Hence, the creature becomes aware that his situation is not idyllic, but rather an imposed solitary life by understanding Milton's masterpiece of the fallen Adam and Satan and considering it an example of his own state.[222]

Beyond its primary gothic atmosphere, *Frankenstein* also carries an apocalyptic dimension which frames the theme of scientific ambition not only as a personal failure for Victor, but expanding also into an existential threat to humanity. Bloom interestingly points out the apocalyptic side of *Frankenstein* considering first the pursuit of the solitary creature for consolation, then for revenge,

[218] Spark, M., *Mary Shelley*, cit., p. 158.
[219] Clemit, P., Op. cit., p. 34.
[220] Bloom, H., *Bloom's Guides: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein,* cit., p. 10.
[221] Washington, C., Op. cit., p. 161.
[222] Joseph, M. K., Introduction, in Shelley, M. Op. cit., p. x.

and lastly for the apocalyptic self-destruction "that will bring down the creator with his creature."[223] Furthermore, to better understand the catastrophic dimension of the novel, it can be useful to consider Washington's critical lens of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic interpretation of *Frankenstein* as a story closely bound with the theme of reproduction and biopolitics, that is, the power exercised by men over life itself. In drawing an interesting parallel between Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and the "post-apocalyptic imperatives" in *Frankenstein*, Washington discusses that the two novels share similar preoccupations on the preservation of the species. *Frankenstein*, in particular, "turns out to be a novel about protecting normative institutions"[224] because the creature is denied the possibility to have a female companion due to Victor's fears of a monstrous progeny. Indeed, according to Washington, *Frankenstein* theorizes "post-apocalyptic Romanticism's love"[225], being animated by concerns about the survival of the human species. At the creature's request for a female companion, Victor scornfully replies: "Shall I create another like yourself, whose joint wickedness might desolate the world? Begone! I have answered you; you may torture me, but I will never consent."[226] According to Washington's reading, Shelley's novel presents post-apocalyptic concerns because "the creature threatens to extinguish humanity if he is not provided a mate to continue his genealogy"[227], as he declares to work for Victor's destruction as a revenge for his sufferings.[228] Washington argues that the second act of creation eventually undertaken by the scientist "confronts Frankenstein with the biopolitical implications of his actions."[229] This can be inferred from Victor's considerations, in chapter XX, of the danger of having two monsters free to move in the world, expressing his fears of the monsters' criminal actions against humanity as follows: "Even if they were

[223] Bloom, H. (ed) *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*. *(Modern Critical Interpretations).* New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987, p. 9.
[224] Washington, C., Op. cit., p. 154.
[225] Ibid., p. 157.
[226] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 145.
[227] Washington, C., Op. cit., p. 151.
[228] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 145.
[229] Washington C., Op. cit., p. 163.

to leave Europe and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the dæmon 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."[230] In particular, Victor is afraid that the monsters' union would generate a 'race of devils' to substitute humans. According to Washington, Victor's thought is an essential element that represents post-apocalypticism for humanity:

> In Victor's imagination the creature would truly be a post-apocalypse for humanity because the individualistic anarchy that they would reintroduce into society would dissolve the social contract, placing everyone in the state of nature. [...] Frankenstein fears that, if the creature were to act on this reproductive desire [...] then his further monstrous reproduction would amount to an act of autopoiesis, the self-creation of life.[231]

Indeed, the mechanism of creation and inevitable destruction that link the two characters is taken into account in Washington's analysis as he draws on Foucauldian notions on biopolitical implications at stake in *Frankenstein* as a "set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power."[232] Hence, Victor's decision to destroy the still incomplete female monster (*Frankenstein*, p. 166) is interpreted by Washington as an act meant to protect humanity, what the scholar defines as "the biopolitical, apocalyptic purpose par excellence."[233] According to this reading, the act of destruction is biopolitical, since Victor exercises his power over life and death on his creation, aiming to protect the

[230] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 165.
[231] Washington C. Op. cit., p. 165.
[232] Foucault, M., "Security, Territory, and Population", p. 6, as cited in Washington C., Op. cit, p. 152.
[233] Washington, C., Op. cit., p. 152.

human species from a monstrous threat. At the same time, Victor's violence against the female creature is considered to have an apocalyptic purpose as it is driven by Victor's fear that failing in his goal to preserve humankind would condemn it to extinction. Underlining the cautionary aspect of Foucault's idea which seems to emerge in *Frankenstein,* Washington frames Victor's creation as a biopolitical advancement, an attempt to expand human powers over life and death. However, in doing so biopolitics emerges in its limitations since it "can always exceed human control because 'it becomes possible … to create living matter, to build the monster, and, ultimately, to build viruses that cannot be controlled and that are universally destructive'"[234], as Washington reports in Foucauldian terms. The ultimate act of biopower, that is, Victor's project to create life assembling pieces of dead bodies and the power he exerts in destroying his second project while still ongoing, eventually turns against the master himself. As Washington argues, the novel presents the monster's destruction and "the subsequent manner in which biopolitical creativity can boomerang on its creators and destroy them."[235] As a consequence of societal rejection and of remaining alone, without any fellow female creature, the creature takes revenge against his own creator. In a prolonged trail of tragic events, starting with the murder of Victor's young brother William, and the wrongful execution of Justine, the servant adopted into Frankenstein's household, the narrative culminates in the violent deaths of Victor's bride Elizabeth Lavenza, his friend Clerval, and finally, Victor's father. Interestingly, Washington interprets Victor's and the creature's situation as a metaphor: just like the creature made out of stitched body parts is the one and only of his species, making him a literal "last nonhuman", so Victor is the last of his own lineage, becoming structurally a "last nonhuman" and occupying therefore a similar position to the creature's.[236] Indeed, Victor's and the creature's fate are clarified by Washington through a parallel between the "biopolitical building of the monster" and Derrida's concept of the "society's 'autoimmune structure': that is, how the pursuit of life's

[234] Ibid.
[235] Ibid., pp. 152-153.
[236] Ibid.

advancement leads to its destruction."[237] Drawing on the metaphor of an autoimmune system, which attacks and destroys itself from within, so Victor's personal ambition to succeed in scientific advancement turns against him: by destroying the female creature to prevent the monstrous reproduction, his own lineage is wiped out in turn. In this regard, Washington argues that "the novel functions as an exemplar of how autoimmunity works by ultimately rendering the creature (this excess created by biopower) biopolitically inert because he does not get to reproduce."[238] In discussing the post-apocalyptic implications of the novel, Washington claims that the creature functions as the representation of humanity's extinction "either in terms of its obsolescence or through the creature's intentional extirpation of the species."[239] Indeed, this can be inferred from the creature's physical portrayal throughout the story, remarkably gigantic in stature and able to withstand extreme weather conditions; he moves with "superhuman speed"[240] through the ice, his height superior to Victor's and his limbs more agile.[241] As he leaves marks on trees to make Victor follow his traces, the creature admits that he seeks "the everlasting ices of the north, where you will feel misery of cold and frost, to which I am impassive."[242] The creature's physical endurance, thus, renders Victor, and by extension the human species, obsolete: unlike his own creation, Victor can hardly bear the same harsh weather conditions, as his body would perish sooner. However, despite this threat of human extinction, Washington carefully points out that the creature's first motives are not truly apocalyptic. In fact, what the creature desires above all is to fulfil a human desire of love and companionship, "to become Adam with his identical Eve in Paradise."[243] Because of the denial of his desire, the creature transforms himself "into a post-apocalyptic agent that represents humanity's Last Days as he wages

[237] Ibid., p. 153.
[238] Ibid., p. 167.
[239] Ibid., p. 153.
[240] Shelley, M., Op. cit, p. 98.
[241] Ibid., p. 100.
[242] Ibid.
[243] Washington C. Op. cit., p. 165.

war on them,"[244] his violence being a consequence of exclusion. This desire is manifested in the seemingly picturesque imagery the creature presents to Victor when urging him to create a female creature: "My food is not that of man [...] acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment. My companion will be of the same nature as myself [...]. The picture I present to you is peaceful and human, and you must feel that you could deny it only in the wantonness of power and cruelty."[245] Washington interprets this fantasy as essentially post-human, even a utopia[246], because the creature "proposes an anti-speciesist agenda."[247] That is, the creature imagines his future existence outside the hierarchical order imposed by society, according to which nonhuman life, as he is considered to be, is subordinated to human needs. However, according to Washington's approach, the utopia the creature is offering can only fail, since "postapocalyptic, posthuman possibility is prevented by the autoimmune internal workings of a sympathetic society that will always destroy different, non-normative life in the pursuit of its own species' biopolitical advancement."[248] The creature's fantasy cannot be realised, as it cannot be controlled by human norms. It is, on the contrary, sacrificed by humanity's "sympathetic narcissism"[249] in order to protect humanity's biological continuity. For this reason, Washington ultimately asserts that in *Frankenstein* "monstrosity is contained, quarantined, and finally disposed of."[250]

2.3. Frankenstein's creature: a dystopian experiment of human improvement and scientific progress still relevant in the contemporary age

Frankenstein's imagery of the outcomes of Victor's experiment has inspired dystopian visions of foreseeable consequences of an uncontrolled scientific and technological progress. For this reason, it

[244] Ibid.
[245] Ibid., p. 146.
[246] Ibid., p. 165.
[247] Ibid., p. 166.
[248] Ibid., p. 168.
[249] Ibid.
[250] Ibid.

is worth examining Mary Shelley's interest in science, which is apparent throughout the novel, alongside the broader, modern debate on whether applied technology constitutes a utopian advancement or rather a dystopian force. For instance, Megan Stern's essay *Dystopian anxieties versus utopian ideals: medicine from 'Frankenstein' to the visible human project and 'Body worlds'* (2006) explores cadaver dissection in medical practice during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Stern situates the discourse within the utopian ideals of the time and within Shelley's complex response to the practice, revealing the conflicting attitudes towards cadavers and their anatomy study as a medical practice. Stern argues that "when Shelley was writing *Frankenstein*, the fate of being dissected was popularly regarded as an extreme personal violation, hence its use as a punishment for the worst criminals in society and later for the most impoverished."[251] Despite this, Stern's analysis shows an interesting aspect of cadaver dissection, that is, the growing utopian value of medical practices. Indeed, from the second half of the eighteenth century, cadaver dissection acquired a new meaning for medical advancement because of the influence of Enlightenment ideals about freedom and equality. In this way "improvements in medical understanding, institutional organization and training became associated not simply with improving general health, but also with creating a better, more equitable society."[252] According to Stern, such medical improvements were possible due to the crucial role played by newly discovered anatomical techniques which "promised to uncover and ultimately 'solve' the mysteries not only of the body, but also of disease, life and death."[253] Interestingly, Victor expresses a similar desire as a young student of natural science early in the novel. Despite his desire of defeating disease and death was born out of personal trauma, due to the untimely loss of his mother, Victor's statement that "wealth was an inferior object, but what glory would attend the discovery if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but

[251] Stern, M. "Dystopian anxieties versus utopian ideals: Medicine from *Frankenstein* to *the visible human project* and *Body worlds*, Science as Culture, 15:01, 2006, p. 78.
[252] Ibid., p. 82.
[253] Ibid.

a violent death!"[254] seems to give voice to the utopian scientific aspirations of Mary Shelley's epoch. Stern considers this passage as telling of Shelley's engagement with the scientific ideals of her time, pointing out that Victor's longing to expel any sort of human sickness and to make man immune to death "echoes the utopian goals of the modern medical tradition."[255] In the post-French Revolution English society, studies and practices on cadavers expanded considerably, as "the anatomical cadaver seemed to hold the key to utilitarian goals of physical and by extension social improvement."[256] Medicine increasingly reckoned that the "progressive improvement of technoscientific understanding and manipulation of the human body"[257] could secure a state of good health, leading in turn to an improvement of living conditions for the majority of the population. With the corresponding advancements of hygiene conditions and public health, hospitals emerged as another symbol of the post-revolutionary world, carrying a number of values, from liberalization and social responsibility to the increasing emphasis on individual rights, which were strongly determined by capital.[258] As a consequence of these scientific and medical improvements, the cadaver used for scientific purposes acquired a new status by the early nineteenth century: it was not only a mere "symbol of the unknown, or a source of anatomical information, but was the key to understanding the processes of living and dying. It was crucial in furthering the utopian goals of medicine [...] the unlimited extension of human knowledge through science and ending the suffering and weaknesses of the human body."[259] Reading *Frankenstein* within the anatomical debate in medicine, Stern interprets the novel as a negative response to the scientific developments of that time, due to Shelley's ambiguous relationship to the topic. This ambivalence is evident in the novel's dual portrayal of anatomy, as it is represented "both from the utilitarian, rational perspective of the emerging medical profession and from the popular

[254] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 37.
[255] Stern, M. Op. cit., p. 66.
[256] Ibid., p. 82.
[257] Ibid., p. 62.
[258]Ibid., p. 63.
[259] Ibid., p. 64.

perspective of horrified revulsion."[260] As Stern points out, echoing Marshall's analysis, this type of ambivalent representation is further complicated by political values attached to both perspectives, making it apparent the transforming political and economic values brought up by the new medicine.[261] Yet, despite the illusory fulfilment of the utopian scientific program, Stern agrees with Washington in asserting Victor's failure and subsequent downfall of his utopian dream. In particular, Stern notes Victor's shift in attitude towards his creature when he realizes his monstrous appearance, which he immediately links to an inner hideousness, and more specifically when the monster shows signs of intellectual independence. Drawing on Rutsky, Stern observes that "this change in Frankenstein's perception of his creation can be read as a shift from a utopian response to technology, understood as that which can empower humanity, to dystopian anxiety once the technology in question shows signs of autonomy and thus threatens human authority."[262]

The novel's popularity has thus expanded well beyond its plot and its ill-fated characters. With regard to its scientific theme, despite being often interpreted as a warning of forthcoming events, Clayton, similarly to Stern, considers Mary Shelley's complex attitude towards science. By offering a nuanced interpretation of the novel's critique, Clayton asserts that what Mary Shelley really criticized in *Frankenstein* was "the excesses of an overwrought sensibility"[263] rather than the excess of scientific enquiry in itself. By pointing out that Shelley was more engaged with the science of her own time than with speculations on future improvements, Clayton claims that she could distinguish "between 'good' and 'bad' science, the former epitomized by what she saw in Erasmus Darwin's respect for nature, the latter by Humphry Davy, Luigi Galvani, and Adam Walker's interventionist

[260] Marshall, T. *Murdering to Dissect: Grave Robbery, Frankenstein and the Anatomy Literature*, as cited in Stern, M., Op. cit., p. 65.
[261] Ibid.
[262] Rutsky, R.L., *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman,* as cited in Stern, M., Op. cit., p. 67.
[263] Clayton, J., "Frankenstein's futurity: replicants and robots", in Schor, E. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Companions to Literature), 2003, p. 88.

approaches."[264] The excess of sensibility dramatized in the novel, on the other hand, was part of a broader literary tradition; themes such as the pursuit of immortality, human arrogance to compete with God, and the mad scientist obsessed with the occult, were common literary topos for the nineteenth century, which can also be found in Faust, Cain and Melville's Ahab.[265] Clayton's analysis, therefore, concludes that the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein* aims to "lay bare the dangers of Romantic egotism"[266] rather than condemning science or natural philosophy.

Over the years, *Frankenstein*'s afterlife has permeated popular culture and arts, the tale being adapted and reinterpreted both in literature and in films. For instance, Clayton interestingly points out an emerging inclination among writers and artists who "have begun to interpret Shelley's tale of a modern Prometheus as promising things they would like to see happen in real life."[267] Therefore, Clayton claims that *Frankenstein*'s legacy has been used "to register some positive views of a future containing artificial creatures"[268] taking as examples some of Hollywood's productions such as Steven Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), or Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995). According to Clayton, these types of revisions can take two forms: in the first type, they "explore genetic and reproductive technology"[269], while in the second type they "reimagine *Frankenstein* in a world of cyborgs, artificial intelligence (AI), artificial life (AL) and robotics."[270] Hence, beyond the scholarly debate, *Frankenstein* has also served as an interpretative model for artists and writers to reflect on matters of ethics and human responsibility in relation to scientific and technological development and to its application as a means of improvement for human life. Given the breadth and the complexity of the topic, this section presents one of the most fascinating examples illustrating the relationship between *Frankenstein* and the contemporary dystopian vision on techno-scientific progress and its

[264] Ibid., p. 86.
[265] Ibid., p. 88.
[266] Ibid.
[267] Ibid., p. 85.
[268] Ibid.
[269] Ibid.
[270] Ibid.

impact on human life.

Daniel Panka, in his study *Transparent subjects: digital identity in Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein' and Charlie Brooker's 'Be right back'* investigates the connection between Victor's story and *Be right back,* the first episode of the second season of the acclaimed British dystopian tv-series *Black Mirror* (2011-present). Considering *Be right back* as a recontextualization of *Frankenstein*, Panka shows how both stories, despite belonging to two different epochs, similarly illustrate the problem "of models of personal identity and attributions of subjectivity"[271] therefore "questioning the feasibility of maintaining the dichotomy between 'artificial' (i.e., non-human) and 'natural' (i.e., human) identities"[272] within the context of post-humanist debate and the modern theories of digital identities. The protagonist of *Be right back* is Martha, a young woman who struggles to cope with the loss of Ash, her partner, following his death in a car accident. In order to tolerate the mourning, she is persuaded by a friend to subscribe to an online service that "reassembles [Ash's] identity from his online footprints and communicates with her, first through text, then voice messages."[273] Progressively granting access to more advanced levels of her partner's digital identity, Martha reaches an 'experimental phase' which includes Ash's virtual version as a "synthetic body that needs to be gestated in a bathtub."[274] Martha, while initially fascinated by the possibility of relieving her grief through this technology, grows increasingly dissatisfied, rejecting Ash's replacement and ultimately locking him up in the attic, while the episode's epilogue shows Martha celebrating with her early-teenage daughter, who brings a slice of cake to the android version of Ash.[275] Panka's analysis focuses on the examination of both the novel and the episode within the framework of post-humanist ethics, which includes the debate on the decentring of man from his

[271] Panka, D., "Transparent Subjects: Digital Identity in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Charlie Brooker's 'Be Right Back'." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2018, p. 308.
[272] Ibid.
[273] Ibid., p. 310.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid.

traditional privileged position within the world order. By presenting *Black Mirror*'s thought-provoking episode, Panka draws a telling parallel between Frankenstein's creature and Ash's digital version in *Be right back*, both defined by the relation to their creators and the meaning their existence carries. Indeed, according to Panka, both creatures "are transparent, meaning that they are surveilled, taken apart, and meticulously assembled. Though their transparency manifests itself in different ways, both creatures are defined by their relation to secrets and the tensions of post-humanist ethics."[276] Similarly to Washington's approach in considering Victor's shifting attitude towards his own creature, Panka argues that Victor struggles to accept the creature as human, despite having devoted years of his studies, passion and effort to create it. He rather calls him 'fiend', 'daemon', or also 'monster', since Victor is unable to accept the human side of the creature because of his body. Being an assembled composition of dead matter, in fact, the creature can never be fully human to Victor's eyes, who cannot even recognize the creature as a sentient being[277], in spite of the creature's demonstration of eloquence and knowledge. Consequently, Panka asserts that Victor turns out to be a non-progressive person at last, because his rejection of the creature mirrors the rejection for other possible human futures.[278] Within the post-humanist discourse, the physical body plays a crucial part in defining the subject and whether it has the right to exist in itself or rather to be controlled by a master. Similarly to Washington's post-apocalyptic and post-humanist reading of the novel, Panka explores the meaning of the creature's body and the extent to which it upsets Victor to the point that he feels legitimized to despise and destroy it. Indeed, Panka claims that the creature's body may be considered an embodiment of a new paradigm. He is not recognized as a legitimate identity yet, as Victor's rejection shows, and for this reason he may serve as an example of hybrid subjectivity.[279] Hence, Panka ascribes to Frankenstein's creature a digital identity "in the sense that it is a result of transparent

[276] Ibid.
[277] Ibid., p. 316.
[278] Ibid.
[279] Ibid., p. 318.

calculation, operation, and design"[280] deriving from Victor's ambition to create an exceptional being so that he could finally overcome his own personal fears. Likewise, the character of Ash in *Be right back* shares common features with Frankenstein's creature: both are the result of fragments of former identities assembled together, and both are firstly desired yet later despised by their creators. In fact, Martha's shifting attitude towards her substitute partner may recall Victor's realization that his creature cannot be considered a human being and his subsequent denial. Panka argues that "both the creature and Ash elicit the same response in their masters, who rule that the assemblage subject is inadequate to qualify as 'human' in this framework."[281] Being focused "on identity as affected by biology and chemistry"[282], Panka further observes that *Frankenstein* serves as an initial framework for *Be right back*, which develops the theme of creation and identity gradually shifting the focus on "the impact of information technology on contemporary subjectivity"[283], eventually mirroring the more contemporary anxieties on digital identities and online practices. Despite the differences, both texts partake in "the ongoing debate about technosubjectivity and our ethical responsibility towards posthuman creatures."[284]

Taking into account the historical and literary context of Romanticism and its pervasive apocalyptic imagery, as well as Mary Shelley's personal life and the most significant events that led her to write *Frankenstein*, it may be argued that the novel "explores the perils of usurping the divine monopoly on creation, the creature standing in part for 'the new man' of the revolutionary ideal, and also centrally focuses on the Godwinian [...] theme of naturally virtuous individuals being corrupted by society."[285] In underlining the relevance of Mary Shelley's oeuvre not only as an innovative nineteenth-century novel, but also with regard to the scientific discoveries and improvements of her

[280] Ibid., p. 316.
[281] Ibid., pp. 318-319.
[282] Ibid., p. 310.
[283] Ibid.
[284] Ibid.
[285] Claeys, G. (ed). *The Cambridge companion to utopian literature*, cit., p. 110.

time, this chapter shows how Victor Frankenstein and his creature continue to inspire debates on the consequences of uncontrolled human ambition and its costs. This reading may situate the novel within the utopian-dystopian discourse, through which scholars, writers and artists continue to question themselves about possible future scenarios of scientific and technological advancements and their consequences on human life, as exemplified by the tv-series *Black Mirror* and the episode *Be right back.* Similar anxieties about humanity's precarious fate are also present in Mary Shelley's more mature novel *The Last Man* (1826), whose apocalyptic vision of a global disease threatening human extinction will be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

"The last man! Yes, I may well describe that solitary being's feelings,
feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race,
my companions extinct before me."[286]

3.1 The topos of lastness and the Malthusian theory in the first (post) apocalyptic novel

This final chapter examines Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* as a post-apocalyptic narrative, the novel being at once heir and reinterpretation of the Romantic literary tradition. Inspired by her personal life, literature and scientific theories such as Malthus's *Essay on Population*, in *The Last Man* Mary Shelley deeply delved into her anxieties over species survival in the face of a global disease. In this regard, the author investigated both social and political consequences of human fragmentation, such as the sense of solitude experienced by the protagonist, Lionel Verney, and the failure of all political institutions and ideals, which cannot escape the plague.

When Mary Shelley wrote her impressions about feeling the last of her 'beloved race' in her journal in 1824, she was mourning the dissolution of the Shelleyan circle to which she had belonged, the intellectual community with which she had travelled across Europe, and which contributed to shape and expand her literary sensibility. She was lamenting her existential isolation, especially after her comeback to England the year before, in 1823, with her only surviving child, after Percy's death from drowning in Italy. Lord Byron died shortly after in Greece, as a consequence of a fever contracted during a fight for Greek independence against the Turks, and his death greatly affected Mary Shelley.

According to Morton D. Paley, Mary Shelley had three main hopes once back to her homeland: to obtain maintenance from her father-in-law, Sir Timothy Shelley, to publish the poetry of Percy himself, and to make contacts with the publishing scene to expand her own career as an

[286] Shelley, M., 1824, in Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. vii.

author.[287] She edited and published the collection *The Posthumous Poems* of Percy B. Shelley in 1824[288], working in the same year on her new book until December 1825, managing to publish *The Last Man* the following year.[289] Harold Bloom identifies the novel as the attempt to celebrate not only Percy Shelley, but also "her experience as part of the very gifted and intellectual company of Shelley and Byron"[290], after years marked by personal loss and the struggles to establish herself as a recognized author. However, the novel was not received favourably at first in the literary world of the time. Paley notes that part of the criticism addressed to the novel stemmed from its unsettling subject-matter, while other objections were due to the fact that "it came not early but relatively late as a presentation of the subject."[291]

Indeed, alongside the apocalyptic imagery of destruction represented in visual arts by painters, another concept developed as an early nineteenth century product in the literary sphere, that is, 'the last man', as argued by Spark.[292] The fashionable topos of the 'last man' had already been in circulation for roughly twenty years when Shelley published *The Last Man*; particularly, in the decade 1816-1826 "the subject was variously treated by numerous poets [...] notable among them Cambpell, Byron, Hood and Beddoes."[293] For instance, critics such as Spark, consider Thomas Campbell's poem *The Last Man*, published in 1823, as a source of inspiration for Mary Shelley, with its famous lines: "The Sun's eye had a sickly glare / the Earth with age was wan/ The skeletons of nations were / Around that lonely man! / Some had expired in fight, -the brands/ Still rusted in their bony hands; / In plague and famine some!"[294] In his poem, Campbell approached the theme of plague and solitude, depicting a lonely survivor who witnesses the physical decay of the world. Additionally, the poem is

[287] Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. vii.
[288]Fisch, A., Mellor, A. K., & Schor, E. H. (eds) *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit., p. 6.
[289] Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. viii.
[290] Bloom, H., *Bloom's Guides: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein,* cit., p. 15.
[291] Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. xxi.
[292] Spark, M., Op. cit., p. 197.
[293] Ibid.
[294] Campbell, T., *The Last Man,* 1823, as cited in Spark, M., Op. cit., p. 197.

imbued with an evident religious tone, since Campbell's main purpose was to "assert his faith in God, who will preserve man from annihilation by rescuing his soul"[295], as noted by Palacio.

Likewise, Byron's poem *Darkness* (1816) confronted with a similar topic and atmosphere, thus conveying a more visionary and apocalyptic tone: "The bright sun was extinguish'd, and the stars/ Did wander darkling in the eternal space, / Rayless, and pathless, and the icy earth / Swung blind and blackening in the moonless air."[296] In her reading of *Darkness*, Bravo underlines the apocalyptic tone of these lines as the most impressive element for the readership. She also maintains that the detailed description offered by the poetic voice is "the way a man saw the end of life on earth"[297] and, more specifically, it is the representation of the man's personal interpretation of the ending as "the end of Man's passions."[298] Hence, according to Bravo, the pervasive morbid imagery of the poem suggests it was written by Byron in a personal fit of melancholy.[299] Moreover, *Darkness* is considered by Chris Washington as a text that not only faces the theme of the 'last man', but more specifically "dwells in extinctualism, offering on the one hand survival and on the other hand an affirmation of its impossibility."[300] In Byron's poem, then, the images of end and apocalypse emerge as strictly personal considerations centred on the poet's own sensibility and experience, rather than addressing a universal concern for the whole of humanity.

As the 'last man' theme proliferated across British art and literature in the first part of the nineteenth century, Paley notes that the topos of lastness may have originated from a narrative titled *Omegarus and Syderia, a Romance in Futurity*, published in 1806. This work was originally published as an anonymous English novel, despite being actually a translation from the French *Le*

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[295] Palacio, J., "Mary Shelley and the 'Last Man', a minor romantic theme", *Revue de littérature comparate,* vol 42, n 1, 1968, pp. 46-47.
[296] Byron, G., *Darkness*, 1816, as cited in Williams, J., *Mary Shelley: A literary life.* Houndmills, Basinstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000, p. 104.
[297] Bravo, M., d.P., "Literary creation and the supernatural in English romanticism." in *Gist: Education and Learning Research Journal* 1, 2007, p. 142.
[298] Ibid.
[299] Ibid.
[300] Washington, C., Op. cit., p. 72.

Dernier Homme, written by the French author Francois Xavier Cousin de Grainville.[301] According to Paley, Cousin de Grainville's contribution was for a long time neglected, yet he was recently reassessed by critics as a significant author within the apocalyptic genre. In his analysis, Paley considers Alkon's viewpoint that presents *Le Dernier Homme* as a rewriting of the Book of Revelation, being therefore still anchored to a traditional Judeo-Christian framework.[302] However, Paley recognizes Grainville's pioneering work not only for the innovative theme of the 'last man' developed in a prose epic, but also because through *Le Dernier Homme* Grainville established some of the conventions of the genre, namely "a male survivor [who] witnesses the arbitrary destruction of human life, which all the arts of civilization are incapable of staving off. Certain sub-themes, such as election and reprobation, the hope of a millennium and the disappointment of that hope, and a peculiar relation to biblical typology [...] are explored."[303] Being also influenced by the Gothic tradition, *Le Dernier Homme* captured both the religious apocalyptic visions of a divine salvation and the Gothic supernatural elements that motivate the characters' actions.[304]

Campbell, Byron, and Cousin de Grainville, then, are some of the authors who devoted part of their literary production to the topos of the 'last man', thus interpreting the subject matter according to their own experiences and concerns on eschatological themes of lastness. Nevertheless, critics find a telling difference between such authors and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man.* Indeed, much as *Frankenstein* introduced an innovative structure and initially shocked the readership due to its exposure to themes of creation and destruction, *The Last Man* likewise represents a significant departure in its thematic scope. Despite the fact that 'last man' narratives had already been explored in poetry and literature by the time Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* was published, her innovation on

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[301] Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. xxi.
[302] Paley, M. D., "'Le Dernier Homme': The French Revolution as the Failure of Typology." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1991, p. 69.
[303] Ibid.
[304] Ransom, A. J., "The First Last Man: Cousin de Grainville's *Le Dernier Homme*." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2014, p. 325.

the representation of a catastrophe and the development of the topos lies in the overall secularization of the apocalyptic narrative. As Paley argues, "Mary Shelley undercuts, overturns, and ultimately subverts the familiar Romantic conjunction of apocalypse and millennium. [...] Mary Shelley denies the linkage of apocalypse and millennium in a novel that laments the insufficiency of art to establish a redemptive world order."[305] Similarly, Ramson agrees with this interpretation, underlining the innovate aspect of Mary Shelley's work in relation to Grainville: because of the novel's "total secularization" and its origins in realistic tradition, "Shelley's *Last Man* inaugurates a more viable structure for futuristic fiction than *Le Dernier Homme* provides."[306]

Within this literary context, Fisch considers Mary Shelley's literary production as a means through which she could explore a variety of themes, spanning from "seventeenth-century scientific revolution with masculine hubris and an imperial colonization of nature in *Frankenstein*"[307], to domestic oppression as in *Lodore* and *Falkner*.[308] As far as *The Last Man* is concerned, Fisch analyses the novel in its representation of nature that distances itself from its traditional Romantic imagery. Indeed, through *The Last Man* Mary Shelley reflected on nature and its role within the human world in a different way from the typical Romantic vision, responding therefore to a "scientific redefinition of nature no longer as female but as natural."[309] What emerges in the novel, then, is a type of nature which is indifferent to the consequences of the plague on human lives. Additionally, Lokke identifies this juxtaposition between human fate and nature as a novelty, arguing that "*The Last Man,* drawing a contrast between the sickness of humanity and the health of nature, stands out as unique against its literary precursors that depict the demise not only of humanity but also of nature, or even of the entire universe."[310] That is, Mary Shelley subverted the traditional paradigm of the apocalypse by separating

[305] Paley, M. D., "'The Last Man': Apocalypse without Millennium", in Fisch, A, Mellor, A.K., & Schor, E.H. (eds), *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein,* cit., p. 10.
[306] Ransom, A., J., Op. cit., p. 320.
[307] Fisch, A, Mellor, A.K., & Schor, E.H. (eds), *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein,* cit., p. 6
[308] Ibid.
[309] Ibid.
[310] Lokke, K. E., "The Last Man", in Schor, E. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., p. 116.

human survival from the survival of the natural world. Similarly to Fisch, Lokke notes that Mary Shelley's novel represents a humanity which succumbs to the disease "in the face of a vigorous and blooming nature utterly indifferent to its fate."[311] Williams further situates this innovation within Mary Shelley's main oeuvres, *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man,* contrasting the political and scientific concerns in these two novels. In particular, he maintains that, while in *Frankenstein* the reader engages with the radical political ideas of Godwin, and with "science as the potential enabler of enlightened progress"[312], in *The Last Man* Mary Shelley expressed a more pessimistic view, as well as "her disenchantment with contemporary manifestations of cultural and political progress."[313]

Beyond the literary topos of the 'last man', then, Mary Shelley deliberately engaged with the political and scientific theories of her own time in her 1826 novel. Her choice to narrate the sole survivor of a global disease, who also has to face internecine conflicts among rival factions fighting for power and struggling to survive, reflects a set of preoccupations that extend beyond both her personal experiences and the literary conventions she challenged. In this regard, particular relevance may be attributed to the scientific debate of the time on population growth and its consequences, as exemplified by the theories developed by R.T. Malthus.

Before leaving Italy, Mary Shelley had the opportunity to read and transcribe Byron's poetry, through which she came in contact with the poet's ideas on the "decline of civilization, a notion that was influenced by his reading of the work of the French geologist Georges Cuvier"[314], as Bloom notes. Besides Cuvier's theory of a demographic extinction, Bloom identifies the influence of Malthus's *Essay on the Principles of Population* as a further scientific source for Mary Shelley's novel. It is noteworthy that Malthus wrote his *Essay* as a counter-response to Godwin's *Political Justice*. Godwin believed, contrarily to Malthus, that "disease and perhaps even death can be

[311] Ibid., p. 117.
[312] Williams, J. Op. cit., p. 108.
[313] Ibid.
[314] Bloom, H., *Bloom's Guides: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein,* cit., p. 15.

conquered and cancelled out by the powers of the mind."[315] Directly opposing Godwin on ideological ideals, Malthus rebutted Godwin's utopian ideas of perfectibility, charging him with "naive prophesying and set out to refute him in statistical and empiricist terms."[316] Indeed, in his *Essay*, Malthus expressed an apocalyptic vision of demographic collapse, arguing that an unchecked increase in population would inevitably exceed the resources needed to sustain it, warning therefore about "the catastrophic consequences that would result from the overpopulation of cities."[317] Malthus, then, associated the increase of population with a disproportion of the natural resources available. In exploring Malthus's theories, Garrard claims that the English economist acknowledged "the attraction of Godwin's optimism, but points out that 'the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man'."[318] In particular, Garrard takes into account an extract from Malthus's *Essay*, where he demonstrated his theory, claiming that "taking the population of the world at any number [...] the human species would increase in the ratio of - 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256, 512 etc, and subsistence as -1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, etc."[319] According to this theory, the human population tends to grow following a geometrical progression, whereas the means of subsistence can only increase arithmetically, creating a system in which demographic pressure would always exceed the earth's productive capacity to cover human needs. In this respect, Garrard credits Malthus as "the first thinker to insist that social policy be guided by ecological necessity, and his theories of population founded the science of demographics."[320] Therefore, through his *Essay* Malthus was able to represent "humanity facing a perpetual apocalypse without a millennium to follow it."[321] In this regard, Fulford reports a significant passage from Malthus's *Essay*, which

[315] Sterrenburg, L. "The Last Man: Anatomy of Failed Revolutions." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1978, pp. 333-334.
[316] Fulford, T. (ed.), *Romanticism and Millenarianism*, cit., p. 6.
[317] Ibid., p. 16.
[318] Garrard, G., *Ecocriticism*, cit., p. 94.
[319] Malthus, R.T. as cited in Garrard, G., Op. cit., p. 94.
[320] Ibid., p. 93.
[321] Fulford, T., Op. cit., p. 6.

addresses the possible consequences of overpopulation:

> The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are the precursors in the great army of destruction [...] But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague advance in a terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands. Should success still be incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world.[322]

In these terms, Malthus warned about the possible consequences of a disproportion between population and the resources of the earth, which does not resolve peacefully, but rather through the coming of a 'premature death'. This may appear in the form of epidemics, diseases and famine, that intervene to restore the balance between humankind and the earth. Consequently, rather than reflecting on a single event that leads to the collapse of humanity, Malthus theorized that diseases and epidemics are the mechanisms through which an excessive population growth is naturally kept under control.

In *The Last Man* Mary Shelley pushed the themes of disease and the end of humanity to the extreme. Indeed, in her novel the plague has no eschatological origin, and it cannot be prevented nor averted. More importantly, its devastating impact is further exacerbated by another critical element that contributes to the deaths of hundreds of lives, namely a series of conflicts, such as the war between Greece and Turkey, originated because of the expansion of nationalist ideals and personal ambition, alongside the hostilities between political factions emerging in London and persisting even when the plague approaches.

[322] Malthus, R.T., as cited in Fulford, T., Op. cit., p. 6.

By intertwining the biological threat with man-made conflicts, in *The Last Man* Mary Shelley subverted Godwin's ideas on perfectibility of political institutions and Malthus's theory on overpopulation. In particular, the plague's escalation in the novel merges with the numerous political and military conflicts depicted, producing a large-scale annihilation of the species. The disease, then, is not a balancing mechanism to check the population, as theorized by Malthus, but it rather acts as an inevitable agent of extinction, which human beings must come to terms with. Through the main characters, Lionel Verney, Adrian, Lord Raymond and Ryland among others, Mary Shelley exposed the fragilities of socio-political systems and ideals when confronted with a global crisis. Ultimately, she suggested the impossibility of both an eschatological and a secular salvation: there is no divine design behind the plague, nor can any human political or social institution avert death.

3.2 Plague and the end of humanity in the "apocalypse without millennium"

When considering the theme of the end of the world in nineteenth century literature, Zolciak recognizes the importance of Mary Shelley's novel, observing that "literature about an escalating illness or plague that wipes out all of humanity and that also places particular focus on historical and political discussions was not necessarily popular in the Romantic era when Mary Shelley wrote *The Last Man.*"[323] Hence, Mary Shelley was able to realize a novel that represents the end of humanity due to biological causes, departing from the traditional Romantic view that considered the disease in its religious meaning or as an event that could offer a moral teaching.

The novel is divided into three volumes, and it is set in twenty-first century London. The tale is framed by an introduction narrated by an anonymous narrator, who, during an exploration of the Sibyl's Cave in Naples in 1818, discovers a set of scattered leaves which seem to contain prophecies written in various languages. The narrator eventually collects and edits the leaves, presenting the work in a structured form. The interesting element presented at the beginning of the novel is the

[323] Zolciak, O., Op. cit., pp. 1249-1250.

political situation of England. As Williams argues, the country is now governed by a Republic, "the last king having abdicated [...] in 2073. All the central male characters in the novel are major players on the political stage."[324] The political situation of the English Parliament, as well as the characters' personal intrigues and affairs, cover the first volume of the narrative. In fact, the plague does not appear as an imminent threat until the opening of the second volume.

Turning to the characters, Spark identifies in Verney, Adrian and Lord Raymond a clear representation of, respectively, Mary Shelley, an idealised version of Percy Shelley as Adrian, and a more realistic portrayal of Byron in Lord Raymond.[325] This characterization has led scholarship to analyse *The Last Man* as a roman-à-clef, "an act of mourning for Percy Bysshe Shelley and for the three children they had lost, for Byron, and for the collective life they had led"[326], as Lokke observes. Hence, the novel inevitably involves elegiac representations both of Mary Shelley's husband and of Byron's titanism, as well as the progressive political ideas of Mary Shelley's parents.[327] This correspondence extends to the two main political characters in the novel. In fact, Adrian, Earl of Windsor and son of the former King, is characterized by a benevolent humanitarianism, a trait that recalls Percy Shelley's own idealism.[328] Lord Raymond, on the contrary, represents Byron in his biographical traits. Lokke maintains that "when the novel opens, Raymond is a Lord Byron who [...] had led Greece in its successful war of independence against the Ottoman empire. His youth had been characterized by pride and 'presumptuous ambition'."[329] Moreover, within the plot Lokke identifies the characters of Lord Raymond, as well as Evadne, the Greek princess he falls in love with, as the two pivotal figures for the symbolic significance of the plague. In fact, after claiming the dominion of the West over the East of the world, they symbolically drive the disease out of Constantinople,

[324] Williams, J., Op. cit., p. 108.
[325] Spark, M., Op. cit., p. 182.
[326] Lokke, K. E., Op. cit, p. 117.
[327] Ibid.
[328] Ibid.
[329] Ibid., p. 120.

ultimately unleashing it on the rest of the earth.[330]

In *The Last Man*, the political situation in England is remarkably complex, as Paley notes that the Parliament "rules with the agency of a Protector elected by its members."[331] Both Adrian and Lord Raymond are involved in the political events in London, while Verney, a former shepherd introduced to the court through Adrian, narrates the hostilities between them.[332] Additionally, Williams observes that the political situation of the country is uncertain due to the competition for power of several groups of the Parliament.[333] This can be inferred by Verney's own account of the political situation: "Parliament was divided by three factions, aristocrats, democrats, and royalists [...] Some were royalists from prejudice and ancient affection, and there were many moderately inclined who feared alike the capricious tyranny of the popular party, and the unbending despotism of the aristocrats [...] The aristocrats built their hopes on the preponderant wealth and influence."[334] However, despite the fragmented situation of the different political parties, Lord Raymond's political success initially appears to outshine such divisions. Indeed, Paley interprets the initial ideal situation of Raymond "as if the world at large responds to Raymond's touch, in defiance of Thomas Robert Malthus's projections [...], purporting to show that unchecked population would lead to mass starvation."[335] In this respect, an example of the apparent triumph of Raymond's politics over the scarcity that Malthus's theories predicted can be found in Verney's description of the public works undertaken by Raymond once he is elected Lord Protector.

> [...] Various edifices of public utility, were entered upon; he was continually surrounded by projectors and projects, which were to render England one scene of fertility and

[330] Ibid., p. 121.
[331] Paley, M. D., (ed.) Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. ix.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Williams, J., Op. cit., p. 108.
[334] Shelley, M., *The Last Man*. Edited by M.D. Paley, cit., pp. 49-50.
[335] Paley, M. D., (ed.) Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. x.

> magnificence; the state of poverty was to be abolished […] disease was to be banished; labour lightened of its heaviest burden [...] The arts of life, and the discoveries of science had augmented in a ratio which left all calculation behind; food sprung up, so to say, spontaneously.[336]

As Williams likewise notes, this passage closely represents a realised utopia.[337] Moreover, Williams identifies as Raymond's principal political opponent the character of Ryland.[338] Gadpaille offers a detailed analysis of this character, pointing out that Ryland reveals his incompetence in leading the country and in facing the health danger once the plague arrives in England. In fact, "Ryland gives in to despair and refuses the burden of leadership, which then falls on Adrian [...] Ryland talks the politician's talk, but in times of crisis he retreats to a selfish and desperate individualism."[339]

In fact, as Ryland eventually dies alone while seeking refuge from the pestilence[340], the idealistic Adrian accepts the leadership of the country, guided by his steadfast moral principles. Therefore, these characters represent a set of polarities within the population, which Mary Shelley clearly depicted when the plague threatens England in the narrative. For this reason, Paley claims that "Mary Shelley makes the plague bring out the best and the worst in human nature"[341] and these polarities are thus carried in the population through the novel.[342] More specifically, Paley argues that the worst of human nature is embodied by Ryland, "the demagogic new Lord Protector who deserts his post and flees to his estates in the north."[343] On the other hand, the best example for humanity is represented by Adrian, who, replacing Ryland to rule the country, declares "I was born for this - to

[336] Shelley, M. *The Last Man*. Edited by M.D. Paley, cit., p. 106.
[337] Williams, J., Op. cit., p. 109.
[338] Ibid., p. 108.
[339] Gadpaille, M., "Pandemic and Politics in Mary Shelley's 'The Last Man'". *The ESSE Messenger*, vol 31, 1, p. 30.
[340] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 319.
[341] Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. xiii.
[342] Ibid.
[343] Ibid.

rule England in anarchy, to save her in danger - to devote myself for her."[344]

Fisch further explores the opposition between Raymond and Ryland in her broader analysis of the novel as a political allegory. In fact, she states that "each political system is represented in the novel by a single leader: republicanism by Raymond; hereditary monarchy by Adrian; democracy by Ryland; theocracy by the 'imposter prophet'."[345] This last character refers to a nameless figure, introduced by Mary Shelley in the second volume, who tries to convince the population to follow him as he professes to be the only one who can lead them to salvation from the disease, heading one group of the English refugees in Paris.[346] Gadpaille's interesting analysis points out that the prophet's authority is apparently built on religion, yet it "extends its teaching to exact complete subordination to the group."[347] Rather than being driven by human compassion, in a situation of fear and disaster the imposter prophet's aim is not "to keep his flock alive, but to prolong his own leadership."[348] According to Fisch, however, in displaying these characters and their reactions in the face of a global emergence, Mary Shelley's criticism is not simply an attack on the failure of personal ambition. In fact, her innovative evaluation lies "in her insistence that these political leaders, and their systems, are flawed in their emphasis on the idealization of the male leader and their glorification of imperial England, separate and safe."[349]

Fisch's comment reveals another significant element within the novel: the characters' belief that England, being an economical and imperial power surrounded by the sea, could remain untouched from the plague. This belief is systematically dismantled throughout the novel, as the disease eventually crosses this barrier provoking the collapse of the population's hopes on immunity, a decisive turning point in *The Last Man.*

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[344] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 255.
[345] Fisch, A., Op. cit., p. 273.
[346] Gadpaille, M., Op. cit., p. 30.
[347] Ibid., p. 32.
[348] Ibid.
[349] Fisch, A, Op. cit., p. 273.

The plague first appears in the second volume, after its outbreak in the East. As Snyder recounts, "after the debacle at Constantinople [...], the plague gradually spreads westward, preceded by rumours of solar eclipses and upheavals with the natural order. [...] At the start it is thought to be carried by pestilential winds, but that theory is soon disproven when the epidemic continues to grow despite all prophylactic measures."[350] Therefore, initially perceiving the plague merely as a rumour coming from the East, the English population fails in responding adequately to the threat of the disease. However, as noted by both Fisch and Snyder, these illusions are soon dispelled, and the lack of preparation leads to a gradual collapse of an entire social, political and economic system. Having previously placed its hopes in Ryland, the population finds itself disappointed when he abandons his homeland. As Fisch points out, "when the Plague does indeed come to the 'well-governed metropolis' of London, however, the English people lose their natural and national superiority for Ryland. [...] The illusion of the separate and safe island is thus destroyed."[351] Besides, the social structure of the country is not the only element menaced by the outbreak of the plague. From the second part of the novel onward, England is confronted with the erosion of its own image as an international superpower and the loss of its economic hegemony. As Fisch observes, in fact, England faces at once an invasion of foreign refugees who try to escape the plague, and an economy in disarray, since trading with countries such as America, India, Egypt, and Greece is stopped[352], therefore reversing its usual situation of a self-sufficient country.

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* unfolds on multiple plots, bridging historical events with complex fictional dynamics. Masterfully blending in the narrative historical moments that involved humanity at a macro level, such as the war between Greece and Turkey, with the microcosm of the main characters, Mary Shelley created a work that displays at once historical issues and personal

[350] Snyder, R. L., "Apocalypse and Indeterminacy in Mary Shelley's 'The Last Man.'" *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 17, no. 4, 1978, p. 443.
[351] Fisch, A, Op. cit., p. 276.
[352] Ibid.

suffering facing a unique, unstoppable enemy, namely the plague. Therefore, alongside the economic and political events represented in the novel, the reader follows the personal vicissitudes of the main characters. Some female figures who follow the events of the previously mentioned male characters are Perdita, Verney's sister and Raymond's wife, Idris, Adrian's sister and Verney's wife, and Evadne, Greek princess and Raymond's lover. This group must face complex dynamics and human emotions, such as love, passion and betrayal. For instance, after having married Perdita, Raymond secretly reestablishes a relationship with Evadne. Once Perdita suspects of being betrayed, Raymond decides to leave England, as he feels wounded in pride, heading to Constantinople and devoting himself to fight for the Greek cause against Ottomans. Consequently, Raymond's departure marks the beginning of the characters' personal dynamics, which intertwine with the military campaigns and the looming threat of pestilence. Verney and Perdita travel to Greece, where they are reunited with Raymond after his capture and subsequent release by the Turks.[353] Evadne dies on the battlefield, wounded by a soldier as she was disguised as a man, only a few moments after having fulfilled an obscure prophecy for Raymond: "Fire, and war, and plague, unite for thy destruction - O my Raymond, there is no safety for thee!"[354] The sinister prophecy turns into reality when Raymond eventually dies in an explosion in Constantinople, left alone after his army mutinies out of the fear of the contagion.[355] Finally, Verney and Adrian decide to travel back to England. During their journey by vessel, Perdita drowns herself consumed by grief after Raymond's death.

At this point, the novel is interspersed with an increasing apocalyptic atmosphere due to the spreading of the plague, as well as a sense of solitude that silently grows within Verney. For instance, he observes what happens when the plague arrives in Athens as follows:

> Hundreds of English residents returned to their own country. Raymond's beloved

[353] Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. xi.
[354] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 181.
[355] Ibid., Chapter 13.

> Athenians, the free, the noble people of the divinest town in Greece, fell like ripe corn before the merciless sickle of the adversary. Its pleasant places were deserted; its temples and palaces were converted into tombs; its energies [...] were now forced to converge to one point, the guarding against the innumerous arrows of the plague.[356]

Verney reports the news of the spread of the disease across different countries as originated from the East, underlining at first a general scepticism, but progressively referring to an effect of terror and panic brought up by the news. Additionally, as previously noted by Snyder, the plague is not the only concern, as other rumours of apocalyptic events contribute to an increased fear of death across the world, such as the rise of a black sun: "A strange story was brought to us from the East [...] on the twenty-first of June, it was said that an hour before noon, a black sun arose."[357]

When the plague reaches London, Verney expresses his dismay when realizing his country is not immune, seemingly giving voice to the entire nation: "The plague was in London! [...] we fancied that the little channel between our island and the rest of the earth was to preserve us alive among the dead [...] the sea was to rise a wall of adamant - without disease and misery [...] truly we were wise in our generation, to imagine all these things."[358] Through these words, Verney's confidence of living in a safe palace shatters, as not even the sea can prevent the spread of the illness. His bitter amazement is juxtaposed to his new awareness that the forces of nature, such as the sea, appear indifferent to the human beings and their needs. In this regard, Verney's disillusionment resonates with Williams's broader claim that human nature is fundamentally flawed and subjected to the indifferent natural forces. More interestingly, Williams points out that "the plague exposes Verney's misplaced confidence in England as a place of special virtue"[359], therefore agreeing with Fisch's account on the

[356] Ibid., p. 223.
[357] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 224.
[358] Ibid., p. 248.
[359] Williams, J., Op. cit., p. 113.

failure of national ambition. Likewise, Snyder asserts that throughout the narrative, it becomes increasingly clear for the characters that the disease cannot be stopped nor diagnosed in any way, emerging as a force whose power lies precisely in its indifference.[360] Therefore, the indifferent nature of the disease contributes to dismantle "the illusion that England can continue to be an inviolate 'garden of paradise'."[361]

Interestingly, Zolciak situates the collapse of the certainty of being able to escape the plague depicted by Mary Shelley within the actual political situation of England during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Accordingly, she argues that "Shelley was writing at a time of intense political discussions on emigration, England's borders were loose. [...] Shelley's novel explores how, in comparison to the vastness of the world, England was relatively small and susceptible to disease and contagion."[362] Therefore, the moment in which Verney understands that not even his own homeland is the right place to live without being touched by disease can be interpreted as Mary Shelley's own considerations on England's vulnerability and on its limits within the global economic and political events, exploring how an island nation cannot isolate itself from global crises.

Spark identifies the indifference of nature and the plague towards humanity in *The Last Man* within Mary Shelley's broader notion of mortality, arguing that her view was "something more than pessimistic acceptance. [...] She shows death, indiscriminate and irrefutable."[363] The disease does not make distinctions among human beings and their nationalities, religions or political beliefs. This is why, according to Fisch, the plague has a levelling quality that erases the differences between East and West, and between rich and poor, differences that, on the contrary, are perceived by the characters at the beginning of the novel.[364] Furthermore, Fisch illustrates this levelling effect through a passage that finally captures Verney's awareness of universal equality before the disease. Verney states that

[360] Snyder, R. L., Op. cit., p. 443.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Zolciak, O., Op. cit., p. 1252.
[363] Spark., M, Op. cit., p. 188-189.
[364] Fisch, A., Op. cit., p. 272.

> The rules of order and pressure of laws were lost [...] Palaces were deserted, and the poor man dared at length, unreproved, intrude into the splendid apartments [...] We were all equal now [...] there was nothing to prevent each from assuming possession of his share. We were all equal now; but near at hand was an equality still more levelling [...] The grave.[365]

The third volume of *The Last Man* opens with Verney's "exodus from England, which is compared to the expulsion of humanity from Eden"[366], as Paley asserts when considering Verney's long farewell to civilization and to his country. Indeed, the protagonist refers to Adam and Eve when claiming that "like to our first parents, the whole earth is before him a wide desert."[367] In this regard, Paley argues that what remains to Verney and his family members is "the hope that at least their suffering will lead to a better world in the future."[368] Therefore, they are forced to leave to escape the plague, embarking on a perilous journey across different countries, including France and Switzerland. Despite his attempts to flee the pestilence, Verney contracts the disease[369], and eventually is the only person who recovers from it. However, his recovery gives him no renewed confidence in humanity's fate, as he is overcome by a sense of degradation, as noted by Snyder, who also argues that this feeling reflects the scepticism with which Mary Shelley approached her adulthood through the character of Verney.[370] Snyder further draws an interesting parallel between Verney and Victor Frankenstein, noting a similarity between the episode of Verney's rebirth and one of Victor's ordeals. After discovering his responsibility for Clerval's death, Victor contracts a fever and is forced to lie in bed

[365] Shelley, M., as cited in Fisch, A., Op. cit, p. 272.
[366] Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. xiv.
[367] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 322.
[368] Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. xiv.
[369] Shelley, M., Op. cit., pp. 336-337.
[370] Snyder, R. L., Op. cit., p. 439.

on the brink of death. When he eventually recovers, he remarks that "'the whole series of my life appeared to me as a dream.'"[371] According to Snyder, similarly to Victor Frankenstein, Verney lies close to death for three days and nights when he contracts the plague, and this experience bestows on him a "heightened spiritual awareness."[372]

Towards the end of the novel, disorientation and disillusionment about the fate of humanity continue to grow in Verney. This is due to the fact he is left alone, after that his daughter and his friend Adrian, whom he was travelling with to find a more salubrious place, both drown at sea during a storm, curiously reenacting Percy Shelley's death. The final scenes of *The Last Man* show Verney entirely alone in Rome, defined by the protagonist himself as "the crown of man's achievements."[373] He is surrounded only by the traces of what humanity has created and that survived the epidemic, that is, architecture, art and buildings. During his solitary wanderings in Rome, Verney decides to write a book. However, wondering who would eventually read it, if humanity is extinguished, he struggles in writing a dedication, until he resolves to address his memoir as follows:

TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD.

SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!

BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE

LAST MAN.[374]

According to Johnson, through this dedication Verney begins to write the story of the end of mankind,[375] "the reader being inscribed [...] precisely as dead."[376] Verney believes he is the only

[371] Shelley, M., *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus,* as cited in Snyder, R.L., Op. cit., p. 444.
[372] Snyder, R.L., Op. cit., p. 444.
[373] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 460.
[374] Ibid., p. 466.
[375] Johnson, B., "The Last Man", in Fisch A.A. (ed.) *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit., p. 265.
[376] Ibid.

person left in the world. Accordingly, within the narrative of *The Last Man* there is no audience left to read his book. Far from finding a solution to his solitude, Verney decides to turn into fiction his existence out of despair, despite acknowledging his gesture as absurd, calling it himself a "silly flourish"[377], yet performing it anyway.[378]

Paley further develops this point in relation to the theme of the failure of art that permeates the final pages of the novel. In fact, Verney "first attempts to imagine companions from history, then from literature"[379], eventually failing on the only objective of his desolated research. From this perspective, Verney presents a similarity with Frankenstein's creature. In fact, despite having two different trajectories, both characters are motivated by the intrinsic and human desire to find a companion, and both end up alone, albeit for distinct reasons. On the one hand, the possibility of having a female companion for the creature is prohibited by his own creator, in order to protect humanity from the threat of a monstrous progeny. In *The Last Man*, on the other hand, the solitary condition of the protagonist derives both from the plague and from the tragic, inevitable deaths of Verney's beloved ones. In Rome, Verney understands that his solitude cannot be escaped nor even replaced by the human-like sculptures of the Vatican. Paley notes that these sculptures, though created by the human genius, "torment their viewer in the perfection of their non-humanity"[380], underlining therefore the tragic absence of real human beings. Ultimately, Verney resolves to sail again, with the only glimpse of hope to "find what I seek, a companion."[381] According to Paley, this final gesture shows that Verney has "learned nothing from the past failures"[382], as the same illusory hope that has already deceived him in the past, returns to make him think about a possible future. This is what Paley asserts when he claims that "nothing, however, was promised about plague, and in our last glimpse

[377] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 466.
[378] Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. xv.
[379] Ibid.
[380] Ibid., p. xvi.
[381] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 469.
[382] Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, Shelley, M., cit., p. xvi.

of him, Lionel is still half possessed by illusory hope, while another part of him recognizes that he is indeed 'Verney, the Last Man.'"[383] Unlike the biblical apocalyptic narratives, in which destruction is followed by the hope of salvation, in the conclusion of Verney's story Mary Shelley did not offer a sharp closure to the readership. On the contrary, sailing off for remote shores to discover whether other human beings have survived, Verney keeps his hope alive despite the tragic events of his life. Even while embracing his solitary condition and the possibility of being the last of his species, it may be argued that he preserves a sense of resilience that keeps the reader hopeful with him. Hope, thus, emerges as a habit of the human mind that even repeated loss and solitude cannot fully extinguish.

3.3 *The Last Man* and the making of a post-human world

The Last Man stands as a complex and multifaceted novel that mirrors Mary Shelley's artistic, intellectual and personal maturity. Recent scholarship has analysed the text from various perspectives, examining the book not only as a roman-à-clef, but also discussing Mary Shelley's critique on the political institutions that emerge in the events of the narrative. However, reading the novel as a pivotal work in the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genre, the recent post-humanist scholarship opens a further interpretation on the meaning of the end of humanity represented in the novel, considered as an opportunity to rethink our relationship with the world and what survives after the end.

As already argued, within the narrative *The Last Man* offers no final consolation or simple answer to the readership. This is an intrinsic characteristic of Mary Shelley's vision of human nature itself, that she expressed through the character of Lionel Verney. For instance, Lokke comments on a passage in the book, in which Verney reflects on the origin of pain and evil in the world claiming that the plague, investing man in his form, "is incarnate in his flesh, has entwined herself with his being [...] O man [...] give up all claim to your inheritance, all you can ever possess of it is the small

[383] Ibid.

cell which the dead require."[384] Analysing this scene, Lokke points out that "Shelley denies humanity the consolations of a benevolent nature or a redemptive relation to Divinity"[385] also charging humankind itself as responsible for its own ruin.[386] Therefore, referring to Verney's own awareness of the indifferent and evil nature of the plague, which is inseparable from the human being, Lokke concludes that Shelley firmly rejected both the "biblical claim that human beings are the inheritors of the earth and the Romantic, secular cult of the titanic human imagination."[387] Hence, through Verney's story, Mary Shelley disrupted the traditional notion and position of humankind within the world that her contemporaries used to support. The novel's true innovation lies in the representation of the dissolution of every construct created by mankind for mankind itself, namely political and social institutions, affective relationships, and also conflicts for supremacy over another country, when confronted with an incurable disease. This has led a part of critical scholarship to argue that what Mary Shelley operated in *The Last Man* is in fact a critique against the anthropocentric confidence of man, exposing mankind's futility in the face of greater environmental forces. For instance, analysing the novel through the lens of personal traumas and existential fears within a worldwide catastrophe, Zolciak argues that Mary Shelley explored her profound anxieties on illness and loss, depicting "the relationship between the human need for control and the power of uncontrollable forces in many aspects of life, including illness and death."[388] According to this viewpoint, through Verney's vicissitudes the novel illustrates and dismantles the traditional Enlightenment conviction that human will, reason and virtue can control natural and biological forces, which are, on the contrary, more powerful than man can perceive. Thus, Mary Shelley's form of apocalypse shows that human agency is illusory, and what remains to human beings is only a glimpse of hope, as pointed out by Paley in his introduction to the novel, when referring to the last scene of

[384] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 316.
[385] Lokke, K.E, Op. cit., p. 118.
[386] Ibid.
[387] Ibid.
[388] Zolciak, O., Op. cit., p. 1258.

Verney leaving for another country as the 'last man'.

For this reason, it is interesting to look at *The Last Man* as a novel that gives the reader pause for thought on refusing to consider man at the centre of the universe. Therefore, it questions our "privileged position in relation to nature"[389], due to the fact that the story "constitutes a profound and prophetic challenge to Western humanism."[390] From this perspective, Chris Washington's analysis tellingly reflects on the theme of anthropocentrism in Mary Shelley's work. Indeed, reading *The Last Man* through the lens of the Anthropocene, Washington reevaluates the book not merely as a failure on humankind, but rather as an attempt to imagine a world beyond man, reflecting on what is left after the end of human existence. This is why, according to Washington, *The Last Man* is a foundational text of the post-apocalyptic genre.

More specifically, considering Mary Shelley's novel alongside the post-apocalyptic implications of Byron's *Darkness*, Washington argues that Mary Shelley's catastrophe of human extinction represents "an opportunity to rethink how we conceive of what politics is and what it can be."[391] Washington identifies the political paralysis in *The Last Man* in the assumption, shared by the different political parties represented, that human beings possess sovereignty over the other non-human species and the earth. When the plague breaks into London, every political assumption collapses, as shown by Ryland's escape. Following Washington's analysis, therefore, the narrative "decouples sovereignty from anthropocentrism because the novel views anthropocentrism as a dangerous ideological form of extinctualism whose circularity prevents thinking through problems of how to live during global climate change."[392] In this sense, the novel explores the danger and subsequent failure of human sovereignty over other species and natural environments, since none of the forms of political power depicted can find a solution to the non-human threat of disease. By

[389] Lokke, K.E, Op. cit., p. 116.
[390] Ibid.
[391] Washington C., Op. cit, p. 66.
[392] Ibid.

transforming an ecological crisis into a direct threat to the human species as a whole, the political institutions in *The Last Man* fail to imagine any possible scenario in which man is not at the centre. Consequently, the anthropocentric view shared by the characters and their political factions can only respond to the crisis by letting humankind face its own extinction. Washington illustrates Mary Shelly's arguments primarily focusing on the representation of non-human life, such as the role of animals and the natural world within the narrative. Towards the end of the novel, Verney wonders whether nature will continue its course, while remaining indifferent to human tragedies and to the disappearance to its former "lord", man himself: "Will the mountains remain unmoved, and streams still keep a downward course towards the vast abyss; will the tides rise and fall, and the winds fan universal nature, will beasts pasture, birds fly and fishes swim, when men, the lord, possessor, receiver, and recorder of all these things, as passed away, as though he had never been?"[393]

Reflecting on Verney's words, Washington points out that the last man's question is indeed a post-humanist inquiry that expresses an existential doubt and a paradox at once. Indeed, on the one hand Verney's question establishes a conflict between the human and non-human, while on the other it suggests the protagonist's final awareness that the creatures of the non-human world will eventually continue unaffected by humankind's disappearance.[394] Washington further explores this argument by identifying an asymmetry within the Romantic anthropocentric vision of the world in *The Last Man*. Although the earth and its resources are necessary for human subsistence, "in the event or advent of global disaster, humans are not necessary for earthly survival."[395] It is precisely this imbalance between humankind's dependence on the earth and the earth's indifference to humanity's survival that leads Washington to situate *The Last Man* within the discourse of the Anthropocene. In particular, the scholar recognizes Mary Shelley's pioneering role in theorizing that "a new posthuman politics

[393] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 413.
[394] Washington C., Op. cit, p. 16.
[395] Ibid.

for living on and with the world"[396] is needed, since in her novel, the small group of humans who survive the plague have to face their "loss of control over the world."[397] In this regard, according to Washington, the formation of a new post-humanist politics is not a negative consequence of extinction, but rather a possibility to reconsider the human presence on the earth. Therefore, in a parallel with Byron's *Darkness*, Washington argues that both the poem and Mary Shelley's novel "anticipate modern climatic fears about a post-apocalyptic, posthuman future"[398], yet obtaining different results. On the one hand, "Byron's poem struggles to [...] break free from the anthropocentric politics"[399] of his time, while on the other hand Mary Shelley was able to envision "a politics anchored in the nonhuman."[400]

Additionally, Eileen Hunt offers an insightful interpretation of Mary Shelley's novel in her essay *Mary Shelley's The Last Man: existentialism and IR meet the post-apocalyptic pandemic novel* (2023). According to Hunt, *The Last Man* dramatizes the interpersonal and international conflicts between human beings that, if left unchecked, can "spiral into the wider social and political injustices of violence, war [...] species extinction, pandemics [...] loneliness and despair."[401] Hunt specifically argues that, through her novels *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man,* Mary Shelley helped develop new sub-genres of the modern political science fiction, namely post-apocalyptic, existential and dystopian.[402] This is due to the fact that both novels "confront the social problems that arise from humanity's technological and cultural interventions in the wider environment."[403] Consequently, in her analysis Hunt focuses on restoring *The Last Man* as a pivotal work for twentieth century dystopian literature, in the intersection with the existentialist tradition and the representation of International

396 Ibid., p. 66.
397 Ibid.
398 Ibid., p. 71.
399 Ibid.
400 Ibid.
401 Hunt, E.M., "Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*: existentialism and IR meet the post-apocalyptic pandemic novel", *Review of International Studies,* vol 49, n 5, 2023, p. 836.
402 Hunt, E.M., Op. cit., p. 832.
403 Ibid.

Relations in literature that Hunt calls "Literary IR."[404] Therefore, through the exploitation of interpersonal dynamics and international political conflicts that exacerbate wars, according to Hunt *The Last Man* is an existential book, since it contemplates "the meaning of life and death and their relation to the formation of personal and communal identities."[405] At the same time, the apocalyptic trait Hunt finds in Mary Shelley's novel derives from the "speculation on the aftermath of a devastating catastrophe that poses an existential (life-endangering) threat to a person, community, or species."[406] Following a similar perspective to Washington's anthropocentric reading of the novel, Hunt interestingly interprets the epidemic in *The Last Man* in metaphorical terms, as the symbol of humanity's failed capacity to control its self-destructive actions even "unto its own extinction."[407]

Similarly to Paley, who underlines the element of hope that characterises Verney during his last journey, accompanied only by a dog and some literary works including Homer and Shakespeare, Hunt finds in this scene a sense of hope that reveals humanity's true nature, despite seeming paradoxical after humanity's extinction. As Hunt claims, "the plague's unmaking of the global impact of war and imperialism leads, paradoxically, to Verney's remaking of the imaginative conditions for love, hope, renewal, and even the prospect of a cosmopolitan peace."[408] Following Hunt's reading, the post-humanist discourse in *The Last Man* fully realises when Verney understands that human beings are inevitably mortal, and accepts that they may even become extinct. In a sort of epiphany, Verney understands that "humanity, understood as humaneness need not, and must not, be extinguished."[409] In this regard, Hunt attributes a philosophical and abstract meaning to the term 'humaneness', framing it as an idealized cosmic solidarity with the world itself.[410] By reinterpreting the purpose and the fate of humanity after the apocalypse, Verney "paves the way for understanding

[404] Ibid.
[405] Ibid., p. 834.
[406] Ibid.
[407] Ibid.
[408] Ibid., p. 839.
[409] Ibid., p. 842.
[410] Ibid.

humaneness or genuine compassion as post-human: for it arrives after the Anthropocene, yet in time to save the world from human-made destruction."[411] Likewise, Berger, too, in his work *Post-Apocalyptic rhetorics: how to speak after the end of Language* (1999) reflects on post apocalypticism in literature and science fiction. More specifically, he focuses on what happens after the end, and ultimately underlines that the intrinsic essence of mankind is what the apocalypse truly reveals. In Berger's viewpoint, then, "in many science fiction post apocalypses, what survives is some version of humanity, in the midst of the inhuman. Humanity in its essence [...] is what these apocalypses unveil."[412] Hence, both Washington's analysis and Hunt's reading of the events narrated by Verney consider the novel not only as a disaster narrative. Similarly, they point out that the failure represented in the novel can be read as a way to reconsider the position of humankind within the world, having therefore the possibility to think about new hopeful alternatives to recognize human's dependence and continuity with the non-human world, instead of man's sovereignty over it.

Nevertheless, these post-humanist interpretations depart from the language of hopelessness of the novel, remaining at a theorical level of analysis, in particular as far as Verney's last scene is concerned. In fact, the protagonist clearly expresses feelings of despair and desolation for his situation, underlining that the motivation to leave Rome lies in the unbearable solitude imposed by his condition, which leads him to search for change, rather than by a hopeful vision of a better future: "I form no expectation of alteration for the better, but the monotonous present is intolerable to me. Neither hope nor joy are my pilots - restless despair and fierce desire of change lead me on."[413] Hence, despite Hunt's theoretical viewpoint of attributing to Verney a sense of cosmic optimism towards the non-human world, Verney's actual emotional state in the last pages of the book indicates that he has actually no agency in either protecting or destroying the natural world, since he is the sole survivor of an extinct species.

[411] Ibid.
[412] Berger, J, Op. cit., p. 10.
[413] Shelley, M., Op. cit., p. 469-470.

In fact, in contrast to Washington's and Hunt's reading of the novel, most scholarship insists on a gloomy interpretation of *The Last Man*. For instance, Sterrenburg demonstrates in his seminal study that *The Last Man* pessimistically enacts the failure of all human endeavours and utopian ideals, reflecting Mary Shelley's pessimistic and apocalyptic vision of the world in the future.[414] Consequently, the novel dramatizes the catastrophe through the impartial and invincible force of the plague that leads to humankind's fall without any possibility of renovation.[415] In particular, analysing the revolutionary context in which Mary Shelley wrote *The Last Man* and the political dynamics driven by the characters within the novel, Sterrenburg claims that in *The Last Man* Mary Shelley "copes with the problem of revolution by cancelling out history itself."[416] Therefore, while post-humanist scholarship provides a fascinating and contemporary reading of *The Last Man,* Sterrenburg's analysis underscores the novel's bleak trajectory, remaining faithful to the literal meaning conveyed by Mary Shelley and seeing *The Last Man* as a tale which expresses a resolute meditation on the lack of a greater wisdom that governs the world and on the ultimate futility of human ambition.[417]

To conclude this chapter, it is noteworthy that *The Last Man* displays Mary Shelley's most profound fears about solitude, disease and death. However, the greatness of Mary Shelley, already shown in *Frankenstein*, and fully accomplished in this more mature narrative, lies in her ability to depart from her own microcosm and mere biographical events, to realize works of fiction that address human beings as a whole, universally connecting the readership since every human being faces similar anxieties era after era. Accordingly, it is precisely *The Last Man*'s refusal of presenting a simple answer to the fear of extinction, as well as the failure of the apocalypse to reveal a millennium, that makes this novel a pivotal work in Mary Shelley's career as an author. As Zolciak claims, Mary

[414] Sterrenburg, L., Op. cit., pp. 328.
[415] Ibid., p. 332.
[416] Ibid., p. 331.
[417] Ibid., p. 332.

Shelley's anxieties "enhanc[e] the quality of her work"[418]; therefore, her concerns about loss, loneliness and illness can be understood as a deliberate literary achievement. Under this light, it is telling to consider again what Mary Shelley confided in her journals in 1824, about feeling "as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me"[419], only a few hours before learning about Byron's death. According to Hunt, Mary Shelley' s precise use of the word 'extinct' suggests that she was aware of "a profoundly personal and psychological link between the shock of the loss of individual life and the mourner's ascent to existential contemplation of abstract and absolute nothingness."[420] For this reason, as Zolciak concludes, the anxieties portrayed and explored in Mary Shelley's works, whether her novels or her personal journals, "inspire an innovative approach to not only comment on her personal adversities, but they also distance her from her contemporaries, therefore allowing her to create a new literary genre."[421]

[418] Zolciak, O., Op. cit., p. 1249.
[419] Shelley, M., 1824, in Paley, M. D., (ed.), Introduction to *The Last Man*, cit., p. vii.
[420] Hunt, E.M., Op. cit., p. 846.
[421] Zolciak, O., Op. cit., p. 1249.

CONCLUSIONS

This thesis discussed Mary Shelley's novels *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* through the perspective of utopian, dystopian and apocalyptic discourse. While both works are pivotal in the literary tradition of Gothic fiction, their enduring significance lies in their early engagement with apocalyptic and dystopian elements, through which Mary Shelley explored the intertwined themes of scientific advancement, technology and existential fears regarding disease and the end of civilization. For this reason, the present work aimed to demonstrate Mary Shelley's visionary contribution to the development of dystopian and apocalyptic fiction, highlighting the novels' resonance within the literary field, as well as Mary Shelley's ongoing relevant impact on the contemporary debates on science, human responsibility toward technological improvements and the human condition within the world.

In order to properly contextualize Mary Shelley's novels within the dystopian and apocalyptic literature, the first chapter established a general framework of the concepts of 'utopia', 'dystopia' and 'apocalypse'. Foundational works such as Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), the eighteenth-century English satire, and the political turn of the word 'dystopia' used by John Stuart Mill in 1868, serve as examples of the developments of utopian and apocalyptic thoughts across the ages. Utopian aspirations and apocalyptic anxieties have long been intertwined in a variety of fields, including philosophy, religious domain and literature. Similarly, representations of the end of the world are rooted in the existential concerns about human fate and mortality, which are manifested in various artistic forms, namely poetry, paintings and religious writings. The French Revolution was the pivotal historical event that marked the end of the eighteenth century. It affected not only political ideals, philosophy and social norms in France, but it also had consequences in the English intellectual sphere and literary culture. Moreover, the apocalyptic imaginary also shaped Romantic poetry and literature, influencing Mary Shelley's imagination as well. The historical and cultural framework provided in

this chapter is therefore essential to consider the alternative lens through which Mary Shelley developed the story of Victor Frankenstein and his creature, and the events of Lionel Verney and his companions in *The Last Man* within the apocalyptic and dystopian discourse.

The second chapter analysed *Frankenstein*; *or, the modern Prometheus*, framing Mary Shelley's first literary success as a critical response both to the radical ideals of her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, and to the Romantic heroism embodied by Lord Byron and Percy B. Shelley, figures with whom Mary cultivated a personal and intellectual bond. Mary Shelley's biographical background was retraced by considering the literary movement of English Romanticism and the millenarian attitude that emerged between the eighteenth and the nineteenth century in England. Through her portrayal of Victor Frankenstein's Promethean ambition and the creature's tragic trajectory, Mary Shelley subverted the Godwinian ideal of human perfectibility, transforming the Enlightenment faith in human progress into the tale of an individual whose downfall is provoked by his failure to take responsibilities for his own actions and ambitions. In this light, *Frankenstein*'s apocalyptic and dystopian dimensions emerge in the subversion of the Promethean hero and his moral collapse when confronted with unchecked scientific ambition. Furthermore, engaging with Chris Washington's viewpoint on post-humanist and biopolitical perspective, this chapter explored Victor Frankenstein's decision to create and subsequently destroy the female companion of his monster as an act of biopolitical control. This biopolitical reading led to the interesting analysis conducted by Daniel Panka about the similarities between Frankenstein's story and *Be Right Back*, the first episode of the second season of the British dystopian tv-series *Black Mirror*. Through his cross-media, comparative study, Panka delved into the more contemporary post-apocalyptic anxieties, highlighting Mary Shelley's enduring influence up to the present day to inspire contemporary audiovisual culture in confronting issues of technology, human responsibilities and ethical limits.

The final chapter is dedicated to *The Last Man* and the investigation of Mary Shelley's more mature work as a complex exploration of the author's deepest fears of solitude, illness and societal

decline. Firstly, the traditional literary topos of the 'last man' was considered as a popular theme used in poetry and literature at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Accordingly, poets and authors such as Lord Byron, Thomas Campbell and Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville approached the theme of the 'last man' according to their poetic sensibility, emphasizing either religious tones or apocalyptic scenes of destruction. Furthermore, R.T. Malthus's theories on population were addressed as a significant source of inspiration to Mary Shelley's novel. Indeed, in *The Last Man* Mary Shelley was able to investigate the topos of lastness through a distinctive secular perspective. As observed by Morton D. Paley, the novel presents an "apocalypse without millennium"[422], since Mary Shelley's tale of the end of humanity in the face of a global disease denies an eschatological meaning or a divine retribution of the plague. Moreover, Mary Shelley offered a complex narrative dynamic among the characters, who must face both political and personal conflicts. *The Last Man* operates primarily as a roman-à-clef: the characters of Lord Raymond, Adrian and Lionel Verney were modelled after Lord Byron, Percy B. Shelley and Mary Shelley herself. Through this autobiographical viewpoint, scholarship has traditionally considered the novel both as a tribute to Mary Shelley's intellectual companions and as a political allegory. Accordingly, within the narrative of *The Last Man,* the characters' dynamics expose both human and political fragility when confronted with the levelling force of a global disease. The final section presented examples of the more recent post-humanist readings of *The Last Man* offered by Chris Washington and Eileen M. Hunt, whose analysis reframed the novel's pessimism into a catalyst to reflect on the role of humankind in the world. However, despite their works interpret *The Last Man* to reconsider anthropocentric certainties in a post-apocalyptic world, the novel's intrinsic meaning remains pessimistic, as Verney himself reflects in the final moments of the narrative, when leaving Rome because of the unbearable solitude imposed by his condition.

Despite being written in different periods of time and presenting differences of plot

[422] Paley, M.D., "'The Last Man': Apocalypse without millennium", cit. p. 10.

development, characters and themes, *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* represent Mary Shelley's critique of the Enlightenment ideals of progress and the Romantic ideal of the Promethean hero, while simultaneously projecting her deeply personal anxieties about isolation, illness and loss. Even though the characters' trajectories appear seemingly different, they represent instead a progression that mirrors Mary Shelley's personal and intellectual evolution as an author. Through these two literary masterworks, Mary Shelley was able to transform private grief into a universal experience, addressing the readership with existential fears and issues on moral responsibility and human vulnerability in the face of a catastrophic disease.

Two centuries after their publication, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* continue to shape the literary imagination and resonate with contemporary concerns regarding science, ecological catastrophes and post-human scenarios. Through these narratives, indeed, Mary Shelley immortalized both herself and the great figures of English Romanticism, establishing a lasting legacy that expands also beyond literature. For instance, as Cambra-Badii et al. observe, *Frankenstein* still lends its vocabulary to contemporary scientific discourse, with terms such as 'Frankenscience', 'Frankenfood', or 'Frankenstein syndrome'.[423] Indeed, these terms are applied specifically as warnings in the scientific field of studies on robots, genetic engineering and transplantation experiments[424], creating therefore "cultural frames for viewing scientific enterprises and procedures in very specific and visceral ways that imply premeditated actions to alter nature."[425] Similarly, the dark vision that emerges from *The Last Man* has had an impact on the late nineteenth and the twentieth century literature, shaping "the aesthetic behind modern existential, post-apocalyptic, and dystopian fiction and philosophy"[426], as claimed by Hunt. Mary Shelley is recognized, therefore, as a pivotal

[423] Cambra-Badii, I., Guardiola, E., Banos, J.E., "'Frankenstein; or, the modern Prometheus': a classical novel to stimulate the analysis of complex issues in biomedical science", *BMC Medical Ethics*, vol. 22, n. 17, 2021.
[424] Ibid.
[425] Ibid., p. 4.
[426] Hunt, E.M, Op. cit., p. 836.

author who impacted on "countless works of post-apocalyptic and dystopian literature"[427], leaving an indelible mark on thinkers and writers, including H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1897), Alfred Noyes's *The Last Man* (1940), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949).[428]

Within the framework of dystopian and apocalyptic discourse, in my reading both *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* offer a fundamental lens through which the reader can reflect on relevant ethical issues, namely whether human civilization possesses the moral maturity to survive its own ambitions. Given the expanding scope of dystopian and apocalyptic studies, Mary Shelley's works remain pioneering novels within contemporary scholarship. In both novels, Mary Shelley merged personal traumas with universal human concerns, offering a unique perspective on how literature can help explore and reflect on existential crises. Far from being mere nineteenth-century narrative artifacts, *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* invite the readership to think critically about human ambition, moral responsibilities and humankind's survival in the face of forces greater than humankind itself.

[427] Ibid., p. 847.
[428] Ibid.

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Dichiarazione del ricorso a strumenti di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA)

La sottoscritta Beatrice Giotto, matricola numero 1000991, iscritta presso Ca' Foscari al corso di Laurea magistrale in Lingue e letterature europee, americane e postcoloniali, autrice tesi di laurea "(Post) Apocalyptic Shelley: Science, Disease and the End of Humanity in Frankenstein and The Last Man" relatore Prof. Alessandro Cabiati, consapevole delle sanzioni previste dall'art. 76 del Testo unico, D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n.445, e della decadenza dei benefici prevista dall'art. 75 del medesimo Testo unico in caso di dichiarazioni false o mendaci, sotto la propria personale responsabilità ai sensi degli artt. 46 e 47 del D.P.R. 28/12/2000 n. 445,

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