



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione Culturale (LTLLM)

Classe LT-11

Tesina di Laurea

Architects of Destruction *Hope in the Works of Mary Shelley*

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Anno Accademico 2021 / 2022

Architects of Destruction: Hope in the Works of Mary Shelley

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
1. Situating Mary Shelley in The Romantic Circle	7
1.2 <i>Life of Mary Shelley</i>	12
1.3 <i>When Hope Weakens: Dysfunctional Relationships and Child Loss</i>	19
2. Mary Shelley as an empathetic narrator	27
2.1 <i>Playing God Is a Dangerous Game</i>	30
2.2 <i>Alienation in Frankenstein</i>	34
2.3 <i>Hope as a prelude to catastrophe</i>	38
3. Hope is a silent killer	41
3.1 <i>Conversations with ghosts in Mathilda</i>	42
3.2 <i>A Relic of Romanticism: The Last Man</i>	51
Coda: Hope Regained	61
Bibliography	65

Introduction

P.M.S Dawson argues that the romantic poets' belief in their active role in politics gave them a "crucial self-confidence without which they would have been lesser poets"¹. Perhaps it gave them too much confidence, while significantly contributing to the magnitude of their works, it also significantly diminished their grip on reality, they believed themselves to be immortal heroes and passed through life in a carefree way which was fit of their romantic nature. Mary Shelley, on the other hand, seemed to be weary of their overly confident nature, which would lead them all to a premature death. She demonstrated a deep understanding and critical approach to the romantic tendencies of her age and these are reflected in her work. Victor is the prototype of the illuminist who ventures too far in the pursuit of knowledge and his own self-confidence, which is ever growing and culminates in the formation of a proper God Complex. Perhaps if he, and the poets, had been a little less ambitious in life they would not have met such cruel fates. However, she also acknowledges that that which has happened cannot be changed, the agonies they suffered do not taint their work and the recollection of the life they led together does not hold any less value. The romantics varied in backgrounds just as much as in the themes they occupied themselves with, some came from aristocracy, like Byron and Shelly, some from the lower middle class like Keats. Mary Shelley does not merely reflect on romanticism as a passive viewer, she is living through it and her perception of romanticism is heavily influenced by her experiences. Experiences of an exciting life but also experiences of sufferings and disillusionment, which all play a part in her views, in her being so critical and weary of certain romantic ideals and the way her husband and friends engage with the socio-political sphere, the way they engage with each other and with the world. This work intends to analyse the works written by Shelley not only within the context of the time period but, mostly, in the context of her personal life, not looking at romanticism from the outside but from within, looking at the relationships of the circle of those writers labelled as "romantics", their literary relationships, interpersonal relationships and their works. It will analyse how Shelley fits into this circle, her relations to the other members and how her work compares to theirs, mostly how she was influenced by her husband, both in terms of artistic tendencies, and how their relationship sometimes makes way into her texts, not without criticism. Shelley is a complex author, she certainly received an exceptional education for a woman of her time, but the way was certainly not paved for her. She had to establish herself in a male dominated field, in addition to having a husband who was already a prominent poet. It is important to analyse how Shelley fits into the context of romanticism and how she engages with the elements which were characteristic of the period while also bringing her own personal contributions. Her works

¹ P. M. S. Dawson, "Poetry in an Age of Revolution", p.57, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed: Stuart Curran, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 56-81.

show an incredible amount of innovation and an extreme attention to the centrality of the characters and their feelings, often intertwining much of her own life with that of the characters, employing this technique to narrate her own story. What this work intends to focus on is the theme of Hope in Shelley's works, one that has been central to many poets of romanticism but finds in her works an especially fertile soil to show all of the shades, complexities and inconsistencies of man, in other words, humanness in its most raw state.

1. Situating Mary Shelley in The Romantic Circle

“Romanticism” as a concept is ambiguous and hard to define, as a term it is used to refer to artists and writers who lived in a certain time frame. Institutionally the Romantic period is said to begin at the start of the 18th century and to end at around 1850. Trying to locate romanticism within set dates and categorizing the people that lived within that period is incredibly reductive, as it is comprised of ideas and many characteristics that can be found in writers that lived before and after those dates. Even within the circle of “romantics”, there are writers whose styles vary significantly. Romanticism is not attributable to one specific person and it is impossible to locate the beginning of an idea. The development of the ideals typical of romanticism were triggered by socio-political phenomenon, not only literary but scientific but political as well, it is important to look at the cause and effects of these phenomena; why a certain idea come to be and out of which social necessities and phenomenon it was born of. Romanticism as a concept is not contained strictly within a number of ideals and dates that one can highlight, it is broad and varied, it is comprised of general and more specific characteristics which can also appear to be in contrast with one other², paradoxically romanticism, more than other genres, was shaped by poets and writers which "fall" under the same label but whose poetic objectives and focuses are disparate and varied. Within British Romanticism critics refer to the “first romantics” Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth³, and the younger generation of romantics; Mary and Percy Shelley, Keats and Byron.⁴ Even only taking into consideration the younger generation there are clearly many differences in opinions and styles. Percy Shelley and Byron were both very politically oriented, critical towards the institutions, with Shelley being described almost as an anarchic, on one occasion Keats commented on Shelley’s tendencies of speaking, perhaps too openly, of his political views in a letter to Leigh Hunt, the letter reads: “Does Shelley go on telling strange stories of the death of Kings? Tell there are strange stories of the death of poets”⁵. Shelley was even expelled from Oxford College for writing a pamphlet title “the necessity of atheism”⁶. Byron had a complex relationship with the church, he was extravagant, passionate, his characters would later constitute a whole archetype known as the “Byronic hero”, hedonistic, amoral, always on the verge of society. He was also extremely politically involved; he travelled to Greece with the intent of

²Morse Peckham, “Towards a Theory of Romanticisms”, *PMLA*, Vol.66, N. 2 (March 1951): pp. 5-23.

³ See Jerold E. Hogle., Romanticism: “Schools” of Criticism and Theory, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed: Stuart Curran, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010, pp. 1-33.

⁴ *Idem*, pp.1-33.

⁵James A. W. Heffernan, "Adonais": Shelley's Consumption of Keats, *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 23, N. 3, (Fall 1984): pp. 295-315.

⁶ Richard Holmes, *Shelley: The Pursuit*, Harper Perennial, London, 2005.

fighting alongside the Greek in their war of independence.⁷ He was surrounded by an aura of myth, portrayed as someone detached, but his letters show his more passionate and emphatic nature, in his love letters he expresses his devotion to his lovers with an intensity which betrays a hint of neediness. Although his devotion was scarcely concentrated on one person alone, for he was enamoured with many men and women, at one point even having a love affair with Mary's stepsister. Keats, in some ways, is the more typical romantic, devoted to one person whom he idealizes, reminiscent of the *donna angelicata* and Italian poets of the renaissance. Due to their contrasting nature Byron often mocked Keats and made unkind comments on his poetry. Yet, even Keats, who is usually considered the most apolitical of the romantic writers,⁸ occasionally weighed in with his comments on the state of the world. As is apparent, it is impossible to confine any of these writers to a certain philosophy, for they were humans, multifaceted and, as humans are, sometimes inconsistent with themselves.

Mary and Percy's own relationship was short of idyllic and possessed none of the smoothness one would assume when thinking of a *romantic* relationship. What it did possess was raw passion, an imperfectly human love that was unmatched, so different from the idyllic and careless relationships of Byron and the romantic devotion of Keats. It was thoughtful, ardent and meant to last. The very basis for their relationship was not without its fair share of complications, when they eloped Mary was only 16 and Percy 21, Percy was already married and with a child, and with another on the way. Their relationship was disrupted by the unfolding of many tragedies, many happened within the first years, child loss, their own children and also one from Percy's previous marriage, the suicide of Percy's wife, Mary's estrangement from her father, the suicide of Mary's sister Fanny. When they eventually did become lawfully wedded their married life proved to be no smoother, but no matter how dysfunctional they loved each other deeply, they were kindred spirits, even though Mary sometimes felt misunderstood by Percy and could at times shut him out, which in turn upset him.

Mary was an outsider to the literary scene at first, even if she was the daughter of two great writers. She herself had yet to produce anything and was, at first, overshadowed by her husband's fame. Her position as an outsider gave her the opportunity to reflect deeply on all the situations that surrounded her, and, having been exposed to grief throughout all her life (she effectively suffered in only a few years what most people suffer through a lifetime), she felt her sorrow with unparalleled depth, and was sensitive to the pain of others just as much. She saw the flaws of society, and of the poets and their idealism, before, and when, they did not seem to notice them themselves. She was uncommonly well versed in tragedy and had the ability to perceive the sorrows of other people and of the dangers they risked facing even when they were yet to realize that anything worrisome was

⁷ See P.M.S Dawson., *op. cit.*, pp. 56-81.

⁸ *Idem*, pp.56-81.

about to unfold. Hers was an understating of pain and sorrow, one beyond her years, brought about by the premature tragedies of her life. She moved more cautiously than the other poets of her circle, seemed almost to possess an omniscient premonition of where these youthful ideals would take them, and her works are at the same time a celebration and a warning against these passions, but they never completely reprimand them, for however much sorrow their passions may have led them to she could never condemn them or quite regret her decisions. Regret is certainly one thing, in the midst of all the chaos, that she never let herself become consumed by. Her works testify to a life well spent, and worth having been led. From her position as an outsider she became one of the greatest writers of the time and when Percy died she became the curator of his poetry, she took the reins in all literary matters, whereas when Percy was alive he had always been her mentor, he guided her, corrected her writing, his corrections even making it so that he was falsely declared the author of *Frankenstein* at first. It is interesting to see how Mary's work was unjustly attributed to him and later, after his death, his works become her property and were handled by her.

Even within the romantic circle the relationships between those involved were complicated and multifaceted, and as a result so was the movement itself, which was shaped by those who participated in it. It is an approach of posterity to try to categorize and fit everyone into the same box, but romanticism should not be viewed as a set of types, and rules. Rather, it should be seen through the people who shaped it, not one cohesive group which moves together and thinks the same way. Mary Shelley perhaps does not "fit in" to the stereotypical view of romanticism, maybe none of them do, she falls into the cracks, in the in-betweens, of her time, her society, the people, the other poets around her, and isn't classifiable just as a "romantic". Romanticism, after all, is not just a box full of adjectives and as a woman, by definition, she lives on the margin of society and has to seep and slither in.

The cohabitation of seemingly incompatible ideologies and characteristics can be seen in many of the romantic writers, even outside of the canonical group, for example, Shelley and Austen, though two of the greatest women writers of romanticism, incorporated common themes in their works in different ways. In a male dominated field Shelley and Austen were two of the very few recognized female authors, a space in which the works of women were often overlooked and rarely published. They have been two of the pillars of women literature, they have been functional in the study of their time period and still remain relevant nowadays, their works are important sources to look back upon and are able to lend themselves to modern interpretations and criticism in significant ways.⁹ These two writers who may seem diametrically opposed have so much in common and are a great example of the variety present within romanticism. Austen is usually seen as the more typical

⁹Jerold E. Hogle, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-33.

romantic novelist, the patron saint of ladies waiting for a marriage proposal, Mary is the gothic writer par excellence. Yet, there is so much that is shared in the themes of their works and in their lives. Mary Shelley came from a family of intellectuals and was cherished and encouraged by her father who doted on her and wished her to have an extensive knowledge of literature, but she was still a woman, still an outsider. When she married Percy she still had to step into a circle of all male writers and to some degree prove herself, and she certainly proved to be more than capable of participating in the movement. She did not merely step into this pre-existent state of the art and conform her works in order to fit in, she shaped and created new genres and effectively became one of the most prominent figures of the romantic age. Shelley enquires on both social and political matters, this miscellaneous coexistence of different themes which characterized romanticism, it precisely this cohabiting of such different styles that renders romanticism so fascinating.

Austen's characters, while seemingly preoccupied with frivolous things in comparison to Shelley's tragic heroines, still portray a very real and worrisome dimension for women of the time. Austen's characters are by no means less feminist, and the issues and problems they face are by no means less important than those of Shelley's characters. While Austen may appear to be a romantic in its purest form, her novels often hide dark subthemes and troubles, it is up to the reader to recognize and understand the problematics she explicates. Austen has the ability to distract from the more troublesome issues but they are there nonetheless, hidden in plain sight, for the reader to uncover at any moment. Like many women writers before her she does not come too strong at her readers, many of her political and social criticisms are hinted at, sagaciously mentioned between one polite conversation and the other. She does not offer the extensive insights Shelley provides for her characters but the reader is still able to recognize the character's positions and worries if they pay close enough attention. Austen famously wrote the line "let other pens dwell on guilt and misery"¹⁰ nevertheless, there is a certain degree of irony in this statement, for, even though her novels have all the appearance of being jolly, they hide quite troublesome issues. Austen certainly did dwell on her character's miseries and she recounted her fair share of pains and sorrows. Her critiques are there for those who want to see them, while they remain concealed to the unintended reader. Tragedy is simply concealed under the pretext of the dynamics of polite society, but it is always there, quietly accompanying her characters. Dark secrets spill between one cup of tea and the other, sarcastic comments with malicious undertones are whispered in polite conversation, misery is present, hiding in the shadows and corners of the drawing rooms. In that same way, society, manners and more

¹⁰Felicia Bonaparte, "'Let Other Pens Dwell on Guilt and Misery: The Ordination of the Text and Subversion of 'Religion' in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*", in *Religion & Literature*, Vol. 43, N. 2 (2011): pp. 45.

mundane things, still have their place in Mary Shelley's works. Shelley knew of society and appearances, though she decided to ignore their rules in her own life. While her characters are often alienated from society, it is still important to observe the way society is presented in her works and the role it plays. Mathilda and Victor are part of rich upper-class families, they know the rules of polite society, they comply with these rules to some extent. Yet, they do not strive to fit into society, but rather to distance themselves from it. Mathilda's first thought after her father's death is to run away from the company of her relatives and live secluded; Victor is often secluded from his family, does not reach out to them nor does he write back.¹¹ To the troubled minds of Shelley's characters, the company of others is an unbearable burden which suffocates their spirits: they feel compelled to quit it and distance themselves from it as much as possible. The continuity of the social and personal spheres, which always cohabit in their works, is present in all of the romantics because it is present in their life, the more mundane aspects of life always shine through. Austen's characters abide by the rules of society, often with some minor transgressions, but things are usually brought back to order by the end of her novels. Instead, Shelley's characters are on a different level of alienation and inadaptability to society, they break every single rule of moral conduct and the secrets that haunt them doom them to a solitary life, for the company of society is not tolerable for agonized characters such as them. This is different again from Byron's characters, who are also part of polite society. They are usually aristocrats, they have all the potential to mingle and partake in society; the social standing, the beauty, the charisma, they are solitary of their own choice and it is because of their feeling of superiority. They look down on their fellow man, they stay on the edge of society, tending towards folly, of their own choice, they behave in amoral ways and look upon others with disdain.¹²

Mary herself did not exactly abide by the rules of society; she eloped with Shelley, a married man, and had children out of wedlock. Her mother was also quite rebellious in that aspect, she had lovers, had a child, Mary's sister, from a man she was not married to, and she was an opinionated woman writer, which was scandalous in itself for that time. Both mother and daughter were involved with scandals and decided not to conform to society but rather to follow their own desires and indulge their wild spirits.¹³ Austen had a more tranquil life, though she refused a marriage proposal, she also valued her independence above all else and refused to come to terms with the expectation of society for women at the time.¹⁴ Mary was well educated and had read the works of her parents extensively,

¹¹ Mary Poovey, "My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism", *PMLA*, Vol. 95, N. 3 (May 1980): pp. 332-347.

¹² See Martin Philip W., Heroism and History, *Childe Harold I and II and the Tales*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Lord Byron*, ed: Drummond Bone, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004, pp-77-98.

¹³ Charlotte Gordon, "Introduction", in *Romantic Outlaws: the Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft & Mary Godwin*, Windmill Books, London, 2015, p. xix.

¹⁴ Janet Todd, *Jane Austen in Context*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, p. 4.

plus many other political writings therefore, she was quite aware of the rules of polite society, though her characters elude them and her novels are constellated by dysfunctional familial relationships, which mirrors her own visions and the relationships she herself had.

1.2 Life of Mary Shelley

Mary Shelley (née Godwin) was born in London in 1797. She was the daughter of Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* and of the philosopher William Godwin, celebrated for his *Political Justice*. Both her parents had radical opinions on the institution of marriage which were unconventional for the time, and mostly regarded it as an institution born out of necessity rather than as a holy ritual. It was for this necessity that they married, to legitimise their daughter Mary. Mary Wollstonecraft died only 10 days after her birth and, in 1801, her father remarried. Mary was not emotionally close with her stepmother but she did establish a close, if somewhat troubled, relationship with her half-sister Claire Clairmont (formerly known as Jane). Mary grew up reading her mother's books and she had access to her father's library, in addition to private tutoring, and was stimulated by the many intellectuals that visited their home in Skinner Street, where her father also kept his bookshop.¹⁵

Mary Shelley has been described as “The only offspring of a union that will certainly be matchless in the present generation.”¹⁶ However, her union with Percy certainly became even more illustrious. Mary's parents are described by Marshall, who curated the edition of Mary Shelley's life and letters here taken in consideration, as having been great opposites.¹⁷ Godwin was rational, did not perceive love as a thing of importance in men's life, Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, was impulsive and passionate, it seem he did not hold her in high regard at first because he was weary of the excessive talk of her, but by becoming more acquainted they saw in one another the qualities of their characters and intellect “And so it came about that the coldest of men and the warmest of women found their happiness in each other”.¹⁸ Mary grew up cherishing her mother's memory and reading her books, she also grew up idealising her parent's marriage which, her father, in his memoir of Wollstonecraft wrote, described in this manner: “It would have been impossible for the minute observer to have said who was before and who was after. One sex did not take the priority which long-established custom has awarded it, nor the other overstep that delicacy which is so severely

¹⁵ See Betty T. Bennett., “Mary Shelley's Letters: the Public/Private Self”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed: Esther Schor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 211-225.

¹⁶ Florence A. Marshall., *The Life & Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, Forgotten Books, London, 2012, p. 1.

¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Idem*, p. 9.

imposed”¹⁹. Schooled with such sentiments she must have grown up wanting to emulate her parent’s literary and romantic lives.

As expressed in his *Political Justice*, Godwin opposed the institution of marriage, but married Wollstonecraft nonetheless to shelter her and procure them a happier life, in a letter he wrote that

Nothing but regard for the happiness of the individual could have induced me to submit to an institution which I wish to see abolished. [...] Having done what I thought was necessary for the peace and respectability of the individual, I hold myself no otherwise bound than I was before the ceremony took place.²⁰

Their matrimony was unfortunately short lived, for in 1797 Wollstonecraft died 10 days after the birth of Mary, leaving Godwin with his new infant daughter and Wollstonecraft’s previous daughter, Fanny, from a Captain Gilbert Imlay, who was at the time three and a half. Godwin, too set in his “scepticism”²¹ as he called it, felt himself unfit to raise the two little girls. He called on the help of friends, nurses and housekeepers. He was so desperate in his attempt to regain what previous stability he felt in his marriage and in acquiring someone fit to raise the two girls that in the following years he made marriage proposals to several ladies. He finally remarried in 1801 to Mrs. Clairmont, a widow who lived next door to him and had two children of her own, Charles and Jane (later called Claire). They later had an additional child together, William.

Mary certainly grew up in a lively and intellectually stimulating home; she and her siblings were encouraged to develop their intellect. Aaron Burr, an American politician, was a frequent visitor to Skinner Street and his journal we can read bits and pieces of the everyday life of its inhabitants. In a journal entry he writes

In the evening William, the only son of William Godwin, a lad of about nine years old, gave his weekly lecture: having heard how Coleridge and others lecture, he would also lecture, and one of his sisters (Mary, I think) writes a lecture which he reads from a little pulpit which they have erected for him. He went through it with great gravity and decorum. The subject was *Influence of government on the character of people*.²²

The children were intellectually stimulated, read, had tea with the guests at the house, many, like Burr, eminent figures of the time, and were, in the aspect of their intellectual growth well cared for and nourished. Burr was a frequent guest and in one entry of his diary wrote, “Les Goddesses [so he,

¹⁹ *Ibidem*

²⁰ *Idem*, p. 10.

²¹ *Idem*, p. 14.

²² Aaron Burr, February 15, 1812, as quoted in Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

Godwin, habitually designates the three girls] kept me by acclamation to tea with la printresse Hopwood.”²³ He often had tea with the children. Mary was certainly entertained by the intellectual environment of her home and proved to be able to form ideas and write on complicated matters from a very young age. In 1812 Mary was invited to Scotland by one of her father’s acquaintances, Mr. William Baxter of Dundee, she recalls her time in Scotland as one of outmost happiness where she was free to read and dwell on her “waking dreams” as she calls them, write and entertain herself with the company of the other girls of the household, she especially became a close friend of their daughter Isabella. She briefly returned to London for a time with their daughter Christy Baxter but later returned to Scotland for a second period of 10 months.

Marshall seems to render an idea of a Mary Shelley that blossomed during her time in Scotland and no longer felt like she fit in her old home when she returned to London. Her father, as much as he cared for her, was distant and emotionally unavailable and preoccupied with his financial problems, her stepmother was anxious about money, as well as being described as an uncongenial woman. Mary, who was growing intellectually and possessed a bright and joyful disposition, felt all the oppression of that home and was left aching for someone who could truly sympathize with her and guide her in her intellectual growth. At this time Percy Shelley had begun writing to her father, he was an ardent admirer of Godwin, and they began corresponding, they discussed politics and philosophy in their letters. Godwin habitually read Percy’s letters to his family and, in one letter he addressed to Shelley said “You cannot imagine, how much all the females of my family- Mrs. Godwin and three daughters- are interested in your letters and your history”²⁴. The first meeting with Shelley occurred when he, his wife Harriet and her sister, Eliza Westbrook, came to dine at Godwin’s house in Skinner Street. Mary had returned from her first visit to Scotland, which lasted 5 months, the day before, together with Christy Baxter, and was present at the dinner. The dinner, at the time, went without much consideration, Mary and Percy did not meet for quite some time after this one occurrence. Not long afterwards Mary and Christy returned to Scotland, Mary stayed there for another 10 months and only met Shelley again in the May of 1814, when he was again in London and visiting her father’s house, this time without his wife. Shelley was in an anxious state in this period but took interest in Mary, they shared interests and began conversing frequently, they soon became friends. To escape the sometimes-heavy atmosphere of Skinner Street they would meet in St. Pancras Churchyard, where Mary Wollstonecraft was buried. Marshall writes that, “He [Percy] revered the

²³ *Idem*, p. 23.

²⁴ *Idem*, p. 46.

memory of Mary Wollstonecraft, and her grave was to him a consecrated shrine of which her daughter was the priestess”.²⁵

They soon came to care for each other, Thomas Hogg, a British writer and close friend of Percy Shelley, in his *Life of Shelley*, recounts of one time when he and Shelley visited Godwin’s house. Percy had told him “I must speak with Godwin; come in, I will not detain you long”. Hogg tells us that Godwin was not actually home when they entered and this made Shelley impatient who “strode about the room, causing the crazy floor of the ill-built, unowned-dwelling house to shake and tremble under his impatient footsteps”. He then describes the moment in which Mary realised they had come “[...] the door was partially and softly opened. A thrilling voice called “Shelley!” A thrilling voice answered “Mary!” and he darted out of the room, like an arrow from the bow of the far-shooting king”²⁶.

Shelley’s anxieties were caused by the fact that he was desperately trying to raise money for Godwin, who was on the verge of bankruptcy, but was struggling with money himself. He had at first willingly offered his help to Godwin but now felt it almost as if it was an obligation expected of him. He was visiting with Godwin every day and they often met with lawyers. In the midst of all this chaos he confided in her, their feelings for each other grew and become apparent, and finally they confessed them to one another. Percy, though an admirer of her father and a follower of his philosophy, was more impulsive and passionate, and perhaps his optimistic disposition, in contrast to her father’s rationality, was one of the reasons that attracted her to him. Percy’s unhappiness was also caused by the fact that he felt estranged from his wife, though he did not confide this to Mary yet. Knowing they could not be together kept apart for the time. Percy however sent her a copy of his *Queen Mab*, his first published poem, and inside he wrote “Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin- You see, Mary, I have not forgotten you”²⁷ and Mary added her own dedication, writing:

This book is sacred to me, and as no other creature shall ever look into it, I may write what I please. Yet what shall I write? That I love the author beyond all powers of expression, and that I am parted from him. Dearest and only love, by that love we have promised to each other, although I may not be yours, I can never be another’s. But I am thine, exclusively thine.

By the kiss of love, the glance none saw beside,

The smile none else might understand

²⁵ Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

²⁶ Thomas J. Hogg, in Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

²⁷ *Idem*, p. 55.

The whispered thought of hearts allied

The pressure of the thrilling hand²⁸

I have pledged myself to thee and sacred is the gift. I remember your words. "You are now, Mary, going to mix with many, and for a moment I shall depart, but in the solitude of your chamber I shall be with you" Yes, you are ever with me, sacred vision.²⁹

Shelley had eloped with Harriet when they were both very young, in a chivalrous attempt to raise her from the state of oppression she felt in her home, their marriage was initially peaceful. She was described by all their acquaintances as being a congenial, happy and accommodating woman. At some point, however, something changed and she became cold and distant, failing to see her part in Shelley's state of depression. It is important to note that this is recounted by acquaintances, the story of Harriet has been told by many, though very few could claim to have known her intimately. Therefore, much of Shelley's relationship with her is ambiguous and one can only read about it in their letters and in Mary's and Percy's journals. Mary used to record her visits and note whether she was in good spirits or ill-tempered on that particular day. No one other than Shelley and Harriet truly knew the nature of their relationship. It is alluded by Marshall³⁰ that Shelley also probably became convinced that Harriet had been unfaithful at some point in 1814, as she had many admirers. Being a follower of Godwin's philosophy, he did not feel so much the wound of her suspected affair as much as the wounds of her coldness and the dying of love between them. Believing that his marriage, an institution on which he had controversial and uncommon thoughts, been breached, he felt "morally free" to pursue his affection for Mary.³¹

The subsequent events were rapid and chaotic: not having heard from her husband for some time, Harriet wrote to Hookham, his publisher, enquiring after him, and Godwin, who went to Hookman's house on the next day, heard of this letter. Upon hearing of their estrangement, the seed of doubt that something was going on between Mary and Percy planted in his mind and started growing. While carefully trying to maintain a clear view of the situation he proceeded with a series of "moves and counter-moves", engaging and trying to gather information from all those involved. He wrote in his diary on 8 July of a "Talk with Mary", then a "Talk with P.B.S" and on 22 July a "Talk with Jane"³². In the meantime, Harriet had come to London, on 14 July, since Percy had asked

²⁸ George Gordon Byron, *To Thyrza*, (1811), in Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

²⁹ *Idem*, p. 55.

³⁰ *Idem*, p. 60.

³¹ *Idem*, p. 61.

³² *Idem*, p. 63.

her to. Shelley made his position clear to Harriet and expressed his wish to separate; she did not take him seriously and only viewed their disagreements as temporary. Godwin met with Harriet a few times as well. None of them, however, must have said much or given him enough to foresee the events which followed soon after, and Godwin was left powerless in front of the catastrophe which followed. Near the end of the month, Shelley confessed everything to Mary, his unhappiness, his wife's estrangement, and his wish to separate from her. Mary shared his and her father's philosophy concerning marriage: she had, as Marshall writes, "not been brought up to look on marriage as a divine institution; she had probably never even heard it discussed but on ground of expediency"³³, she perceived his marriage as having been corrupted, and was of her mother's opinion that "ties which were dead should be buried"³⁴. She probably placed most of the fault on Harriet for having been so cruel to him, and was therefore perfectly happy to pledge her love for Shelley, even knowing that they could not be married. In eloping with Shelley, she did nothing more than put into practice what she had been taught during her whole life, yet her father condemned her. As Marshall again puts it: "Godwin's practice did not move on the same lofty plane as his principles"³⁵. Mary left her house in the early morning on 28th July, together with her sister Jane, later Claire, and they met with Shelley.

Following their elopement came trouble and anxieties the likes of which no one could foresee; however, even if short-lived, their life together was one of passionate love unlike any other. Even after her judgement had been shaped by the tragedies of her life, Mary never came to regret her decision, neither did Percy. They set off on their journey and left England, passed through France and Switzerland, before they were forced to return to England due to their lack of money. While travelling, they kept a joint diary which was to become the object of their *Journal of a Six Weeks Tour*.³⁶ It contained all their youthful sentiments and excitement at the recent events. Their escape from England is recounted as quite a turbulent one, as Shelley write on 28th July "The heat made her faint [...] I was divided between anxiety for her health and terror lest our pursuers should arrive".³⁷ They arrived at Dover and took a boat, their voyage, which was supposed to last only but two hours lasted much longer and proved to be a rocky one, Mary writes that the wind was "violent and contrary" and writes the details of a thunderstorm "We were proceeding slowly against the wind, when suddenly a thunder squall struck the sail, and the waves rushed into the boat: even the sailors acknowledged that our situation was perilous; but they succeeded in reefing the sail"³⁸

³³ *Idem*, p. 64.

³⁴ *Idem*, p. 65.

³⁵ *Idem*, p. 64.

³⁶ See Jeanne Moskal, "Travel Writing", in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed: Esther Schor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 242-258.

³⁷ Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

The journal is a wonderful collection of their naïve and young sentiments and the passions they felt. In the aftermath of this dangerous voyage, Shelley writes:

I had time in that moment to reflect, and even to reason upon death; it was rather a thing of discomfort and disappointment than horror to me. We should never be separated, but in death we might not know and feel our union as now. I hope, but my hopes are not unmixed with fear for what may befall this inestimable spirit when we appear to die³⁹

Godwin wrote in his diary on 28 July: “Five in the morning. M.J. for Dover”.⁴⁰ Mrs. Godwin ran after the trio in hopes of returning home with her daughter but, as Shelley records in his diary on 30 July, she was unsuccessful.

Jane informs us that she is unable to withstand the pathos of Mrs. Godwin’s appeal. She appealed to the Municipality of Paris, to past slavery and future freedom. I counselled her to take at least half an hour for consideration. She returned to Mrs. Godwin and informed her that she resolved to continue with us. Mrs. Godwin departed without answering a word.⁴¹

Much of their journal is an account of their journey through small French towns, their economic affairs, testifying their scarcity of money and the poor conditions they had to travel and live in, and of the little French villages damaged by war. Their readings, writing, they mention working on one of Shelley’s novels. But also of the beautiful natural scenes that they saw making their passage through France, Mary writes that Jane was in the habit of exclaiming “Oh! This is beautiful enough; let us live here”⁴² upon every new scene that presented itself in front of them.

On August 19, the group crossed the border from France to Switzerland and Mary saw, for the first time, the Alps, a sight which she would never forget and whose marvel would be reawakened and depicted in many of her works.

[...] towering above every feature of the scene, the snowy Alps; they are 100 miles distant; they look like those accumulated clouds of dazzling white that arrange themselves on the horizon in the summer. This immensity staggers the imagination,

³⁹ *Idem*, p. 70.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Idem*, p. 71.

⁴² *Idem*, p. 72.

and so far surpasses all conception that it requires an effort of the understanding to believe that they are indeed mountains.

1.3 When Hope Weakens: Dysfunctional Relationships and Child Loss

The elopement with Shelley, in some ways, drew a close to Mary's childhood, and what she endured in the following years was much more than a single person should bear. Having occurred to them that they had insufficient money to continue their journey they resolved on 9th September to return to England. When they arrived, Shelley tried to reach out to Godwin but he refused to be associated with them. After the trio had left England, Godwin was left to bear a numerous amount of scandals and face his own failures as father, plus the faulty consequences of what his own philosophy, once put into practice had done both for the younger people involved and for his own reputation. The state of Skinner Street was one of chaos, Fanny had returned home, Charles was home as well and William also caused trouble by eloping for two nights at one point. A sort of cold war followed the next few months, with Charles being the only resident at Skinner Street with whom Shelley, Mary and Jane talked for a time. Godwin had replied to Shelley's letter saying he refused any further correspondence unless it was to be carried out through a solicitor. Fanny was forbidden by Godwin from seeing Mary, as she writes in her journal on 13th November "Fanny comes here; she will not see me; hear everything she says, however. [...] Papa tells Fanny if she sees me he will never speak to her again".⁴³ In the same letter she then writes "The reason she comes is to ask Jane to Skinner Street to see Mrs. Godwin, who they say is dying". Her comment on this matter is short and detached, it seems like the news affected her very little. Therefore, Charles was, for a time, the only intermediate between the, what could be perceived to now be, two "families" and would recount to the Shelleys of the life of Skinner Street and to Skinner Street that of the Shelleys. He told them about the trouble William had caused and of Mrs. Godwin's ill temperament and actions.

It is also possible that by this time Jane's presence had started to bother Mary, who perhaps was never entirely keen on the idea of her joining them, but had been reluctant to leave her behind with her mother. Jane, who at about this time decided to call herself "Clara" and later "Claire", and Mary shared a rocky relationship for most of their life. They were undeniably bound by their sisterly love, but Mary also perceived Claire to per a perpetual third. Claire was described as being joyful,

⁴³ *Idem*, p. 99.

with a good humour, and always ready to join in their projects, however lacking the intellectual depth and sensitivity that Mary possessed. Shelley was quite taken with her, and this would arise, throughout their travels, some degree of jealousy in Mary. It was also much speculated that Shelley was at one point involved with Claire, a friend referred to the trio as “Shelley and his two wives”.⁴⁴ Claire’s position within the Shelley circle was often turbulent, her affair with Lord Byron and the daughter that came of it was a cause of great conflict among all those involved. Claire resented Byron for all her life. In a letter addressed to her by Trelawny, a friend of both Shelley and Byron, in 1870, when they were both in old age, he writes: “You have so long nourished your hatred of Byron that you cannot judge him fairly”⁴⁵ and with time Claire came to resent Percy and her sister too for their treatment of her. Trelawny makes some comments on Mary Shelley’s character, which testifies to her and Claire’s decaying relationship, as he surely would not have dared speak so ill of her to a sister who was not impartial due to her own resentment. At some point Claire wrote to her friend Jane Williams, with clear bitterness and resentment: “But in our family, if you cannot write an epic or novel, that by its originality knocks all other novels on the head, you are a despicable creature, not worth acknowledging”⁴⁶

This showed a deep pain and feeling of inadequacy on Claire’s part, living all her life with people hailed for their brilliant minds, overshadowed and perhaps never taken as seriously as she would have wished. Claire resented Byron for not wanting in her a serious companionship, he himself wrote to a friend that he had made it clear to her before leaving England that their affair would not blossom in a serious relationship. However she set off after him when he went to Geneva, also discovering that she was pregnant, and they did for some time resume their relationship, Byron wrote to his half-sister, Augusta Leigh: “I could not exactly play the stoic with a woman who had scrambled eight hundred miles to unphilosophize me”⁴⁷

Their life in London at this time was turbulent, creditors constantly chased Shelley, he was sometimes forced to be apart from Mary, and the relationship with Mary’s relatives was difficult as ever. Their diary entries of the next few months overflow with mentions of lawyers, people coming in for money, Shelley or Claire in turns, or both, going out to collect and deliver money, and all sorts of money related worries. But no matter what was going on in their life their journal demonstrated the happiness and contentment they found in their everyday life and in each other’s company. Everything else going on was merely passing through their existence while they found their love to be the true

⁴⁴ Edith Wyatt. “Shelley and Claire Clairmont”, *The North American Review*, Vol. 205, N. 734 (1917): pp. 118–30.

⁴⁵ Edward John Trelawny, *The Relations of Percy Bysshe Shelley With His Two Wives Harriet and Mary*, Forgotten Books, London, 2018, p. 9.

⁴⁶ Bradford A. Booth, “*The Pole: A Story by Clare Clairmont?*”, *ELH*, Vol. 5, N. 1 (March 1938): p. 67.

⁴⁷ Benita Eisler, *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.

and most sincere source and meaning of their lives. The time they spent apart due to Shelley dodging his creditors brought anguish to both of them as they both expressed in the letters they exchanged in this time.

For what a minute did I see you yesterday. Is this the way, my beloved, we are to live till the 6th? In the morning when I wake I turn to look on you. Dearest Shelley, you are solitary and uncomfortable. [...] I know how tenderly you love me, and how you repine at your absence from me.⁴⁸

Mary to Percy Shelley, London, 25th October 1815

My beloved Mary- I know not whether these transient meetings produce not as much pain as pleasure. What have I said? I do not mean it. I will not forget the sweet moments when I saw your eyes--- the divine rapture of the few and fleeting kisses. [...] I could reconcile it to my own feelings to go to prison if they would cease to persecute us with interruptions. Would it not be better, my heavenly love, to creep into the loathliest cave so that we might be together.⁴⁹

Percy Shelley to Mary, London 20th October 1815

Whatever hurt Mary may have felt from her father's estrangement, she could reproach him too sternly, she was still blinded by her love and devotion and placed most of the blame on his wife. In a letter to Shelley, she writes "I detest Mrs. Godwin; she plagues my father out of his life; [...] Why will Godwin not follow the obvious bent of his affections and be reconciled to us? No; his prejudices, the world, and *she*- all these forbid it. What am I to do? Trust to time, of course, for what else can I do".⁵⁰

There seems to be an element of selfishness in their mutual love, which concerns itself little, if not at all, with the rest of the world. In a diary entry of 9th November Mary writes: "Jane gloomy; she is very sullen with Shelley. Well, never mind, my love – we are happy"⁵¹. On 14th November Shelley writes of a visit from Hogg, his friend from Oxford University, and is pleased of his liking Mary, expressing that his reaction upon meeting her was so important as to be decisive of the fate of their friendship "Perhaps he may still be my friend [...] he was pleased with Mary; this was the test

⁴⁸ Mary Shelley to Percy Shelley, London, 25 October 1815, Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

⁴⁹ Percy Shelley to Mary Shelley, London, 20 October 1815, in *Idem*, p. 97.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ *Idem*, p. 98.

by which I had previously determined to judge his character”⁵². On December 6th Mary makes an entry about the birth of Shelley’s son from Harriet, which is heavy with unconcealed irony.: “Shelley writes a number of circular letters of this event, which ought to be ushered in with ringing of bells, etc., for it is the son *of his wife*. [...] A letter from Harriet confirming the news, in a letter from a *deserted wife!*”⁵³ She clearly resents her position, however meaningless the institution of matrimony might have seemed to her, as Shelley’s wife. During this time Mary had become a close friend of Hogg, who was visiting them frequently, writing “I like him better each time; it is a pity that he is a lawyer; he wasted so much time on that trash that might be spent on better things.”⁵⁴

In February their first child was born, a girl, and premature of quite some time. On 22nd February, Shelley wrote that the child was premature of a few months and was not expected to live. The birth of the baby served as cease-fire in the cold war that had endured between the Shelleys and Claire and the residents of Skinner Street. Fanny finally went to visit her sister, Mary writes on the 23rd that she came and stayed the night, and even Mrs. Godwin sent, through Fanny, a gift of a pair of linen. Fanny continued to visit her sister over the course of the baby’s short existence. On the 24th Shelley wrote “favourable symptoms in the child; we may indulge some hopes”.⁵⁵ However on March 6 Mary wrote: “Find my baby dead. Send for Hogg. Talk. A miserable day”⁵⁶ Mary wrote a letter to Hogg expressing her anguish at the event which reads as follows:

My dearest Hogg my baby is dead—will you come to see me as soon as you can. I wish to see you—It was perfectly well when I went to bed—I awoke in the night to give it suck it appeared to be sleeping so quietly that I would not awake it. It was dead then, but we did not find that out till morning—from its appearance it evidently died of convulsions—Will you come—you are so calm a creature & Shelley is afraid of a fever from the milk—for I am no longer a mother now.⁵⁷

Mary to Hogg, London,

Naturally the thought of her child never completely abandoned her and she wrote many more sad entries in her journal about her, on 9th March “still think about my little baby. Tis’ hard, indeed, for a mother to lose a child”⁵⁸ And on the 13th: “Stay at home; net, and think of my little dead baby. This

⁵² *Idem*, p. 99.

⁵³ *Idem*, p. 100.

⁵⁴ *Idem*, p. 102.

⁵⁵ *Idem*, p. 108.

⁵⁶ *Idem*, p. 109

⁵⁷ Mary Shelley to Thomas Hogg, London, 6th March 1815, Muriel Spark, *Mary Shelley: A Biography*, Carcanet Press, London, 2013, Chapter.3

⁵⁸ Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 109.

is foolish, I suppose; yet, whenever I am left alone to my own thoughts, and do not read to divert them, they always come back to the same point. That I was a mother, and am so no longer”.⁵⁹ Her anxieties spilling over to her dreams as she writes on 19th March “Dream that my little baby came to life again; that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lived. Awake and find no baby. I think about the little thing all day”⁶⁰. However short her existence, her passing haunted Shelley deeply and never left her. It changed her a great deal, Mary had already experienced a tremendous amount of events and experienced life in a whole new way at this point, but the passing of a child set the tone for a much more sorrowful side of her nature, it ripped the ground from under her feet and marked the begging of a change in her, in her ideals, and her view of things and the people around her. This was only the beginning of the many tragic events she would be put through in the following years, during this time Shelley matured and came to reflect more on her interpersonal relationships. The losses she endured refined her already sensitive nature and came through in many forms and anxieties in her works.

The presence of Claire being one of burden must have been felt then more than ever, amidst all that happened, for on the 11th she writes “Talk about Clara’s going away; nothing settled; I fear it is hopeless. She will not go to Skinner Street; then our house is the only remaining place, I see plainly. What is to be done?” and again on the 14th “Shelley and I go upstairs and talk of Clara’s going; the prospect appears to me more dismal than ever; not the least Hope. This is, indeed, hard to bear.”⁶¹ Mary had probably not foreseen the effects that Claire’s presence in their home would have on her family life, her overbearing presence put a strain on her and Shelley’s relationship. At this point, having been so deeply involved with the scandals surrounding the Shelleys she could not, nor did she wish to return to Skinner Street, so for a time she moved to Lynmouth. The Skinner Street household was not made aware of this plan, Claire later wrote a letter to Fanny in which she expressed how content she was in her new situation and expressed the hostile environment she had found herself in before “I am perfectly happy. After so much discontent, such violent scenes, such a turmoil of passion and hatred, you will hardly believe how enraptured I am with this dear little quiet spot”.⁶²

From Claire’s letter it is apparent that things in the Shelley household had not been easy for anyone and both she and the couple must have enjoyed this period of distance from each other. About a year later they paid her a visit, and Mary settled in Clifton for some time while Shelley endeavoured

⁵⁹ *Idem*, p. 110

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*

⁶¹ *Idem*, p. 109.

⁶² *Idem*, p. 118.

to find a home for them. Mary's anxieties at being separated from Shelley again are very apparent from a letter she wrote to him

My beloved Shelley,

[...] We ought not to be absent any longer; indeed we ought not. I am not happy at it. When I retire to my room, no sweet love, after dinner, no Shelley [...] either you must come back or I must come to you directly. [...] My dear, dear love, I most earnestly, and with tearful eyes, beg that I may come to you if you do not like to leave the searched of a house⁶³

Mary to Percy, Clifton 27th July, 1815

They eventually stayed at Bishopsgate for a few months, which seem to have been serene and tranquil and where they had for some time, shelter from the anxieties that had previously haunted them. During this year they made frequent walks in the countryside and kept a diary of their extensive readings, which varied from classics to contemporary works. Their peace was, however, to be broken not before long, yet again by Claire. Claire, being interested in the arts and the theatre had reached out to Lord Byron, who was at the time working with the Dury Lane theatre. Byron was already an established poet and his reputation and many scandals were well known to the public. During their acquaintance they became lovers for a time, which Claire kept a secret and, surprisingly, did not confide even in Mary. It is possible that at this time the Shelleys were introduced to Byron, but still kept unaware of his involvement with Claire.

Shelley's relationship with Godwin became more and more strained, Godwin was still relying on Shelley for money, all the while refusing to be civil with him, and at one point he wrote a harsh letter condemning him for his treatment of him

In my judgment, neither I, nor your daughter, nor her offspring, ought to receive the treatment which we encounter on every side. [...] My astonishment- and I will confess, when I have been treated with most harshness and cruelty by you, my indignation – has been extreme, that, knowing as you do my nature any consideration should have prevailed on you to be thus harsh and cruel. [...] Do not talk of *forgiveness* again to me, for my blood boils in my veins.⁶⁴

Percy to Godwin

⁶³ Mary Shelley to Percy Shelley, Clifton, 27th July, 1815, Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

⁶⁴ Percy Shelley to William Godwin, Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

Shelley clearly suffered from other people's judgements of his family, he had once responded to an anonymous person who had written him a letter enquiring about his life, that he would never "make the public my familiar confidant".⁶⁵ Yet he lamented their harsh judgments and thought they should consider himself and his wife in light of what the two of them only knew, ignorant to the fact that all the public saw was two young people, one a married man with children, and the other a girl of sixteen, who had eloped together. Amidst all this turmoil Shelley had contemplated to move to a remote part of England to avoid the prying eyes of the public, but Claire, who was hoping to reconcile with Byron, who had by this point grown tired of her companionship, convinced him that they should all visit him in Geneva. Shelley admired and read Byron, as his journal testifies, and the idea of meeting him was most probably very appealing to him. And so it was that they all set off for Geneva, where they stayed the summer, which was not much of a summer for that year later became famous as the year without summer. Before leaving, Shelley wrote to Godwin one last time, in an attempt to reconcile and excuse himself of the rash tone he had previously used, revealing their intention of leaving England, perhaps permanently, but still assuring him that he bore respect for Godwin, whom he still viewed as his mentor.

I have been unjust to you- forgive me- burn those letters which contain the records of my violence, and believe that however what you erroneously call fame and honour separate us, I shall always feel towards you as the most affectionate of friends⁶⁶

Percy to Godwin

Their going to Geneva was one of the most decisive events of Mary's life. None of them could have foreseen the events that occurred during that summer, not beyond Shelley's natural curiosity in meeting Byron and Claire's wish to reconcile with him. They later discovered Claire's pregnancy, which was to become the cause of conflict between herself and Byron, and often placing the Shelleys in the uncomfortable position of intermediary. Between their personal relationships and literary conversations, the occupants of Villa Diodati kept themselves amused that summer. Mary said she would often be the passive listener of conversations between Percy and Byron on all sorts of topics.⁶⁷ The atmosphere was intellectually stimulating and one fit for the birth of Mary's greatest work, *Frankenstein*. Famously, on one occasion they decided to engage in the writing of ghost stories, and

⁶⁵ *Idem*, p. 128.

⁶⁶ Percy Shelley to William Godwin, Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 130

⁶⁷ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein (Author's introduction to the standard novels edition)*, Oxford World Classics, 2008, p.195.

thus one unassuming summer marked the beginning of Mary's writing career, and the beginning of a work which would overshadow those of all the other present at the Villa.

2. Mary Shelley as an empathetic narrator

“What can I say, that will enable you to understand the depth of my sorrow?”- Walton⁶⁸

While Marshall comments that “She [Mary] pledged her heart and hand to Shelley for life, and she did not disappoint him, nor her”⁶⁹ The reader can sympathise with Mary’s sufferings and see that this is not necessarily true. Their love was one of great passion but not without misunderstandings. Percy showed a changing and inconstant nature, probably being involved with other women, possibly Claire,⁷⁰ and towards the end of his life becoming enamoured with Jane Williams, a mutual friend of the couple, and addressing many of his poems to her rather than his own wife, which upset Mary and made her feel alienated from him at times. Therefore, that that summer was “unassuming” may be thought only to a certain extent, with all that had occurred in the previous year, the tension felt between the trio was scarcely unnoticeable and hidden; Mary had suffered the unspeakable and had been on multiple occasions disappointed and disillusioned with life and with some of her companions. She was grieving the loss of a child and the estrangement from her father. Her wounded soul was fertile terrain for a novel which told the sorrows of a misunderstood creature. The novel might have been born out of the unconscious feelings of hurt she felt towards Shelley, the disillusionment of a life she had so willingly plunged herself into, hoping to find an emotionally stable situation. It is a sum of all that was hurting inside of her and was too painful for her waking self to face, therefore she bestows upon the creator the role of voicing these anxieties.⁷¹ In the preface to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, she opens up to the reader regarding the events that brought her to write her first novel. She recounts she had enjoyed writing from infancy, and would spend a considerable amount of time employing her creativity, writing, building “castles in the air” and indulging in her “waking dreams”.⁷² Having such a fervid imagination and being fond of daydreaming it comes as no surprise that the idea for her story came to her in one of such occasions while at the Villa. Shelley recounts that the only one writing initially was Lord Byron, working on his third canto of the *Child Harold*, but as it proved, a “wet, ungenial summer”⁷³ and the heavy rains confined them indoors, Byron, at

⁶⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, Oxford World’s Classics, Oxford, 2008, p. 186.

⁶⁹ Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

⁷⁰ Edith Wyatt, *op. cit.*, pp. 118–130.

⁷¹ Anthony F. Badalamenti, “Why Did Mary Shelley Write *Frankenstein*?”, *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 45, N. 3 (2006): pp. 419–439.

⁷² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* *cit.*, p. 192.

⁷³ *Idem*, p.194

one point made the declaration which was to start it all: “We shall each write a ghost story”⁷⁴. The poets of the house, however, failed to produce anything substantial, Mary comments that they soon became bored of the intent of writing prose and abandoned the task. She, instead, spent the following days incessantly thinking of an idea for her ghost story, it was a task which excited her and made her want to prove herself, but she struggled with finding inspiration and felt a certain degree of performative anxiety, as she recalls in the 1831 preface: “”Have you thought of a story?” I was asked each morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.”⁷⁵ At last it was after one of Byron’s and Percy’s conversations, one on the specific matter of science, the experiments of Dr. Darwin and the theory of galvanism that she found her long sought inspiration, it was on that night that she was possessed by one of her waking dreams:

I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts, kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, shows signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. [...] His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life [...] would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench forever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life.⁷⁶

The idea of *Frankenstein* was, therefore, presented to her with the vision of Victor, its protagonist, committing an unspeakable act, making, in the blind excitement of his ideas, a mistake. What the results of this mistake came to be would haunt him and affect him in ways he could scarcely imagine. Yet, while Victor is such a morally grey figure, Shelly never openly condemns him or relegates him solely to the role of the villain, on the contrary, Victor is constantly in-between the figures of villain and victim.

Frankenstein is narrated in epistolary from Walton to his sister, while other shorter letters are mentioned within it. Shelley is aware of the importance of speech, and the distinction between the private world of conversation and that of correspondence, she moves in and out of reality, of the thoughts and feelings of the characters; she crosses thresholds and boundaries. She employs this mechanism to give an insight in her character’s feelings and awareness. Shelley uses free style for intimacy but also to highlight how wrong the characters can be sometimes. In this way the author is

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁵ *Idem*, p. 195.

⁷⁶ *Idem*, p. 196.

able to hint at certain things without betraying and exposing herself. Indirect speech is a way to emphasize that they are not the writer's thoughts but rather the character's thoughts and that they are character viewpoint kind of works. This is important because the characters in her works are not necessarily right about everything, on the contrary, they are quite often mistaken in their judgement, but it is up to the reader to understand this, but most of all to understand *them* and why they believe and think the way they do. They become more self-aware through the book by being put through a series of events the reader is also going through, in this way the reader understands to a certain point what it is like to go through that situation in an educational way.

It is unarguable that Mary Shelley writes a great deal about death, perhaps because she was, unfortunately, surrounded by it a great deal during her life. Death lingers in her every story, in various forms, suicide and homicide as well. Many of Shelley's characters dwell on the death of the self and are in constant conversation on death in way or another. It occupies their thoughts extensively. Behind the author of *Frankenstein*, is a woman whose life was filled with passionate adventures as well as trauma, a woman haunted by death and anxieties, which make their way into her every work and always lay subtext throughout her novels. Hers was a life of reckless passions and haunting tragedies, both sides reflected in equal measures in her works. As one who, for her nature, already possessed a great sensitivity, the events of her life deepened it even more. Her profound sensitivity is manifested in her writing style, which is sentimental and striking, allowing the reader to empathize with the characters. Mary is the empathetic writer par excellence. She is always watching over her characters with benevolence, providing the most extensive insights and giving them every chance to explain their actions, almost as to protect them from the prejudices and critical eye of the reader. She also makes use of her characters to tell her own life, her works are notably full of autobiographic elements. Her narrating style guides the reader throughout the story; she does not demand to weigh in on their moral judgment, but simply to make sure that they *understand* the characters and their actions. She gives her characters the space to explain themselves but, most importantly, to extensively address their feelings, she explains their actions through their emotions. This does not mean she justifies them; on the contrary, she lays the truth bare in front of the readers for them to understand the situations and see beyond the character's introspection. Beyond the concepts of right and wrong what she simply wants to show the reader is the humanity of her characters, that though they may have been at fault, they could not have behaved in opposite manner, for their nature and their emotional state led them to their actions. That though their judgment may have been clouded they could not have been different than what they came to be. Mary Shelley's authorship and literary importance is not limited to what is contained within her novels, it is comprised of everything that is beyond the margins of the paper, it is embedded in everything that happened to her leading up to the writing of these works, everything

that contributed to her inner turmoil and finally pushed her take the leap. Her works seem to beckon us to question her intent; they call us forth to place ourselves in dialogue with the characters, in the solitary act of her writing she speaks to us all.

2.1 *Playing God Is a Dangerous Game*

The story of *Frankenstein* is set in a narrative frame which takes the form of one long letter which Robert Walton, a sea captain leading an expedition to the North Pole, writes to his sister Margaret. While Walton and his crew are stranded in the sea, he rescues Victor from an ice slab floating near his ship and tends to him as he lays dying in his cabin, listening to Victor recount the story of his life, the confession of a damned soul, as Victor perceives himself to be. Walton, whose most agonizing wish was that of finding “a man who could sympathize with me”⁷⁷, eagerly listens to Victor’s story, a man he is utterly fascinated with, and meticulously recounts every detail in his letters to his sister. As Walton recounts Victor’s story he does so from a retrospective manner, for Victor has already died, and, similarly, Victor had recounted his life story to Walton in retrospection. Shelley uses the epistolary form to multiply the narrating voices and deepen the feelings and the anguish of her characters.⁷⁸

The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner by Coleridge is referenced at the very beginning of the novel when Walton first writes to his sister, reassuring her he will proceed with caution on his trip “I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety”⁷⁹ and then again quoted directly from Victor in expressing his anxieties after he brought the creature to life. The Poem recounts the story of a mariner, a man who dooms himself after committing the sacrilegious act of killing an albatross and is punished with the death of all his companions. Remaining the last person alive the mariner is haunted and wanders through life with the desperate need to tell his story, as a warning to others not to commit his same mistakes.

Coleridge’s poem is used within the novel to reinforce Victor’s uneasiness and anxieties, it is a poem told from the perspective of a man with a guilty conscience and it mirrors Victor’s own feelings for he, too, has a guilty conscience. However, outside of the character’s knowledge, there may be an added political side to this intertextuality, knowing, as we do, that Shelley read Coleridge and she certainly knew of his ideologies it is perhaps his own guilty conscience she brings into question by placing him within her work, choosing this particular poem, and bringing him on the same level of moral dilemma as their own characters. Walton and Victor know the poem, and, quoting it themselves, should be wiser than to follow in the same mistakes of the mariner, overstepping the

⁷⁷ *Idem*, p. 8.

⁷⁸ Betty T. Bennett., *op. cit.*, pp. 211-225.

⁷⁹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, *cit.*, p. 10.

boundaries between man, nature and the divine, and yet they do not. Victor and Walton are both blind in their hunger for recognition and the pursuit of their dreams. The reader is aware of their faulty perceptions but they themselves are not. The paradox is quite explicit at the end of the novel. Walton's ship has been stuck for some time and there is general discontent between all those aboard. Having just heard Victor's story and of the nightmarish life he doomed himself to due to his persistence in pursuing something that was not natural, Walton should come out a wiser man, but even at the very end, he fails. Just like Victor, who was driven by a God complex which took him too far in the pursuit of science, Walton resolves on continuing his journey. It is by mere chance that his journey does not continue, as he was more than ready to carry on and is only stopped by the mutiny of the sailors. These men, therefore, have not learned from their mistakes, even if adventurers, scientists, they are limited in their understanding. *Frankenstein* is a combination of themes of hope, revenge, forgiveness and acceptance. Shelley questions the ideas of Romantic optimism by explicating they are born from the egotistical self-devotion of her characters which effectively upset the balance of nature and love⁸⁰.

Frankenstein's creature is made up of parts collected from graves, Victor acknowledges that he "disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame",⁸¹ as such it is inevitable that the creature be profane. Only after the creature is brought to life is Victor horrified with his actions, he quotes the *Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* when telling Walton of the aftermath of the creation, to express his anxieties and the feeling of being haunted, both by the creature and his conscience. «Like one who, on a lonely road/ Doth walk in fear and dear,/And, having once turn'd round, walks on,/ And turns no more his head:/ Because he knows a frightful fiend/ Doth close behind him tread.» This marks the beginning of a fear that will never abandon him again, and it also serves to represent immediately what Victor perceives the creature to be, a fiend. Victor is obsessed with the need to tell his story, just like the mariner, and so quotes the poem to make a point. Victor tells Walton his story just like the ancient mariner tells his story to the wedding guest. The mariner is haunted by his mistake and has to confide in anyone he perceives to be the right person. When Walton confides in Victor his ambition to sail the North Pole Victor decides that this is the right man, he would like to share his story with. It establishes a strong relationship with Coleridge's poem; the novel is based on it and yet Walton and Victor are unaware they risk the same fate as the mariner. After hearing Victor's story Walton would like to go on with his journey and Victor encourages him to do so. The two men have not realized that the journey should not take place, they are limited in their understanding.

⁸⁰ Mary Poovey, *op. cit.*, pp. 332-347.

⁸¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, *cit.*, p. 36.

When Victor begins his tale he tells Walton “You have hope, and the world before you, and have no cause for despair. But I—I lost everything and cannot begin life anew”⁸². Victor’s choice of words is important, he does not mention people, he chooses to say “the world”, meaning he thinks Walton still has the potential to embark on a great project. Victor’s personal romantic ambitions still survive through him. It is not coherent with another thought he expresses to Walton “how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the whole world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow”⁸³. However, Victor is not a coherent person and *Frankenstein* is not a coherent novel, it is flawed at the expense of the investment in sensibility and empathy that Shelley portrays.⁸⁴ If Victor had learned from his mistakes, he would not try to derail Walton, but he cannot help it, he does not realize the harm he is potentially causing. He says he regrets what he has done, yet he invites Walton to pursue his egotistical dream, he says he would have been happier in his native town, but he reminds Walton that he should seize the world.

You may easily perceive, Captain Walton, that I have suffered great and unparalleled misfortunes. I had determined, once, that the memory of these evils should die with me; but you have won me to alter my determination. You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been⁸⁵

Recognizing Walton’s ambitions as his own he perceives Walton as his equal and, therefore, a person worthy of confiding in. Victor does not wish to dissuade Walton from his project, he wishes him to succeed. He shares his story not to warn Walton to change his mind, but to explain where he went wrong so Walton might not commit the same mistakes and truly succeed. It is fortunate Walton is stopped by his crew, for, coherently with the events of the novel, he would have surely continued his journey and met a tragic fate as well. Victor is trying to pass the promethean fire to Walton, he knows he has failed but he sees no reason as to why Walton should, perhaps, by means of aiding he thinks his is redeeming himself to some extent.

Victor puts himself in a god-like position, but he is a faulty God, he has all the optimism but none of the moral strength that allows him to take responsibility⁸⁶, he abandons his creation as soon

⁸² *Idem*, p. 16.

⁸³ *Idem*, p. 35.

⁸⁴ Christopher C. Nagle, “Prometheus Versus the Man of Feeling: *Frankenstein*, Sensibility, and the Uncertain Future of Romanticism (An Allegory for Literary History)” in *Sexuality and the Culture of Sensibility in the British Romantic Era*, (2007, New York): pp.119-141.

⁸⁵ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 17.

⁸⁶ Alan Rauch, “The Monstrous Body of Knowledge in Mary Shelley’s ‘*Frankenstein*.’” *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 34, N. 2, (1995): pp. 227–53.

as his task is complete and spends the rest of the novel at war with it. Ideally, Victor's intentions were good, noble even, it is largely due to Victor's neglect that the creature is monstrous. Victor had intended the creature to be good natured, and perhaps it could have been if only Victor had continued his parenting role and instructed it. Victor is so preoccupied with the creation itself he cannot see beyond it and once the creation is done, he refuses to take on the hardest part, the true godlike task, to act as a moral compass. Victor put in the effort necessary to the creation but ran from the moral responsibilities awaiting him the second it was done. He had the knowledge but lacked the moral depth. How could he act as a moral compass to the creature, even if he wanted to, when in making it he distanced himself from all that made him human and regulated his life, his family and friends. In making the creature Victor progressively loses his humanity, by the time the task is done he is emptied out and hollow. The creature was meant to "pour a torrent of light into our dark world"⁸⁷, but how could he be a beneficial addition to the world when his creator refused to participate in it. The creature was meant as an enabler of Victor's desires, that of bringing good into the world, but it cannot do so when Victor himself does not put his ideals into practice. Since the creature is a reflection of his creator he does not act upon Victor's ideals, he is not a "torrent of light", he ends up being a shadow of his flawed creator. He is the product of a wretched man, and that is what he will bring into the world. He expresses, in more explicit ways, Victor's flaws, the very flaws Victor fails to recognize as his own, and is, therefore, horrified to see enhanced through the creature. The creature cannot improve or attain happiness because Victor does not acknowledge that its flaws and actions are, ultimately, his own. He makes no attempt at guiding him or helping him improve himself.⁸⁸ He maintains until the very end that he is guiltless, ultimately, Victor has meddled in a game he is not capable of playing.

After the creation Victor falls into the pits of despair, to be rescued by his childhood friend Clerval, who acts as a lifeline and reminder of what life was like prior to his insane project. Clerval, bringing familial love, regulates Victor and sets him back on track⁸⁹, which prompts Victor to realise his project had alienated him from the more sensible and important things in life. But he cannot go back to his old life, he must face the consequences of his actions. Playing God has set in motion a series of events in a cause-effect dynamic that Victor cannot escape from. He has doomed himself and his creation, from a wretched God spawns a wretched creature.

⁸⁷ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 36.

⁸⁸ Jeanne M. Britton, "Novelistic Sympathy in Mary Shelley's '*Frankenstein*.'" *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 48, N. 1, (2009): pp. 3–22.

⁸⁹ Poovey Mary, *op. cit.*, pp. 332-347.

2.2 Alienation in *Frankenstein*

Victor's and the creature's loneliness and isolation from society are brought about by different causes. Victor doomed himself by disrupting of the laws of nature and familial stability, and he doomed the creature to a life of loneliness the moment he abandoned it, therefore the creature forcibly engages Victor and extends his condition of loneliness to him. The creature is hopeful at first and enchanted with life, much like Shelley was in her youthful naivety. The novel might have been born out of the unconscious feeling of hurt she felt towards Shelley, the disillusionment of a life she had so willingly plunged herself into hoping to find an emotionally stable situation. It is a sum of all that was hurting inside of her and was too painful for her waking self and so she bestows upon her characters the role of voicing these anxieties.⁹⁰

The story is a chronicle of the progressive mistreatments and agonies the creature is faced with, as it becomes more and more disillusioned with society. A progression of unhappy events which Shelley herself had suffered. It is a mirror of the progressive disillusionment Shelley was met with in the life she had plunged herself into, eager to participate in the exciting and passionate ideals of romanticism. Society, reveals its true face to the creature over the course of the novel: an apparently inviting, comforting, enjoyable companion to others, but out of reach to him. The creature is born unloved, in its first waking moment it faces rejection from its very creator, Victor's inability to love his creation, to whom he refers to as a fiend, dooms the creature to the unaffectionate life he is to live. In painting the creature as a monster, Victor confines the creature to a role it can never break free from, which is to be the reason of its unhappiness "I was benevolent and good, misery made me a fiend [...] make me happy and I shall again be virtuous"⁹¹. We can read many allusions to Shelley's own sense of alienation and unhappiness in the creature's story. The novel makes plenty of references to Shelley's own anxieties, the anxieties concerning her career and writing her first novel, her performative anxiety in writing something that had to be necessarily remarkable, liker her parents' and Percy's work, to meet their standards and expectations. Her melancholic state due to the loss of her child, the estrangement of her father and her relationship with Percy. Her state of alienation was enhanced by Percy's neglect and failure to understand her feelings of abandonment, which grew more pronounced throughout their marriage, especially in the last period of Percy's life. Nevertheless, in spite of everything, they loved each other in an intimate and tender way, and this aspect of her life is what prevails. In Shelley's writing what emerges is the belief that, in spite of all the suffering, the life she led, the people she loved, the choices she made, were all worth it. She latches onto every loving sentiment and holds onto hope until the very end, much like the creature. Neither Mary nor the

⁹⁰ Anthony F. Badalamenti, *op. cit.*, pp.419–39.

⁹¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, *cit.*, p. 78.

creature asked for the pain they had to endure, they both possessed gentle spirits and were met with a harsh rejection. The creature was rejected by his creator and society. When Mellor talks about “parental abandonment”⁹², it could, perhaps, also refer to Percy’s carelessness toward Mary’s feelings. Mellor notes how Percy changed many terms, as in his turning the creature from a “wretch” to a “devil”.⁹³ Mary refers to the creature as a “wretch”, which still indicates the humanity of his nature; he has been made a miserable wretch by the unattainable desire for connection, of his most basic human needs, comfort and love. The word “devil” erases the compassion with which Mary regarded him and renders him an object of blame and evil. Victor anticipates the creature’s tragic desires, he has rejected him, caused him to be abandoned and unloved, from the very first moment he sees him, he proclaims the creature “miserable”. And miserable too shall Victor be for, in abandoning the creature, he seals his own tragic fate.⁹⁴ At the start of the novel, Victor beholds the creature, to whom he has just bestowed life, and at the end, it is the creature that beholds the lifeless body of Victor, his death being the culmination of his tragic fate.

Mary’s writing takes on a confessional form. One could imagine the cabin where Victor lays dying as a confessional with Walton taking on the role of a priest, but it is a faulty one at that, instead of attaining salvation they both irrevocably seal their damnation displaying the outmost egotism. The one person Victor ought to have repented to was the creature, who, instead, is left to view his lifeless body, with the knowledge that even in his dying moments his creator’s views of him remained unchanged. It is a faulty and dark confessional, as Victor effectively embodies the charismatic satanic force of the serpent and Walton is mesmerized by his words, he lets himself be persuaded without once questioning or realizing the danger of the advice he is giving him. Not only does Walton not aid Victor in a constructive way to come to the realization of his mistakes, but he lets himself be corrupted by Victor’s thirst of knowledge. Victor further nourishes the thirst of Walton’s dangerous aspirations by giving him ill advice. At the very beginning of his tale he told Walton he had no intention of sharing the secret of life with him so that he may learn from his mistake “Learn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge”⁹⁵, but yet again he says one thing and proceeds to do another. As Victor lies dying he acts as the serpent, whispering and tempting Walton. Even as his life is about to end, after having recollected the whole course and consequences of his experiment, Victor speaks these words: “I have myself been blasted

⁹² See Anne K. Mellor, “Making a monster: an introduction to *Frankenstein*”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed: Esther Schor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp.9-25.

⁹³ *Idem*, pp. 9-25.

⁹⁴ *Idem*, pp. 9-25.

⁹⁵ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 35.

in these hopes, yet another may succeed”⁹⁶. Victor’s problem is that he does so unknowingly, he does not question his intent or the advice he gives, as he unapologetically believes his intentions to be good and his story to be true. He is too self-absorbed in his story to be persuaded to see things differently. As Victor fails to acknowledge the creature’s feelings and makes it his dying goal to make sure Walton also believes the creature to be a thing of evil, the creature never gets the apology he needed. Walton mourns the loss of his friend, but his mourning is interrupted for in this unholy confessional that is Walton’s cabin the devil comes barging in, for that is how Walton perceives him. Even here, in a place where Walton has rendered himself available to listen to another’s life story, the creature is unwanted. Walton does not partake in the “give-take” dynamic in a wholly beneficial way, he has taken in Victor, listened to his story, allowed himself to become corrupted, pardoned Victor’s sins without moralizing and then refused to do the same with the creature, denying him salvation and remarking his position as one of evil. The problem with Walton’s priest persona is not so much that he lent a sympathetic ear to Victor, for in empathy, forgiveness and humanity lays salvation in the morally dominated world of the novel, it is that he didn’t *understand* any of the warnings he should have caught on to in Victor’s tale. He acted as the enabler to Victor’s self-devoted, self-forgiving ways, indulging him, without realizing that forgiveness was not his to give, for the one who should have delivered Victor forgiveness was the creature. Victor was a man too self-absorbed to understand this and was happy to relieve his guilt, to some extent, through Walton, and Walton was more than happy to deliver it to the man who had charmed him and become object of his devotion. When it comes to the creature Walton effectively refuses to perform any more, demonstrating elective empathy. The creature is left to deal with the life he has been given and to move forwards from things no one ever apologised for, as he never finds compassion from others he has to learn to find the power to heal alone.

Victor’s death is where Shelley, as the author, could have interfered in some way, and denied Victor his sense of salvation, but she did not, for if Victor’s life had led him down that path, and he walked all the way through, it was not her right to deny him of his sense of self-salvation. If Victor had chosen he was content with that then it was his right to be so. The problem, in this unhappy story, is that the people caught up in it do not understand each other, and instead of mending their mistakes they disrupt their social regulation by seeking understanding with other people.⁹⁷ The creature mourns and seeks salvation, but, unlike Victor, he has to do it alone. “What does it avail that I now ask thee you pardon me? [...] he is cold; he may not answer me”⁹⁸. Even at this point, the creature still seeks

⁹⁶ *Idem*, p. 186.

⁹⁷ Jeanne M. Britton, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–22.

⁹⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, *cit.*, p. 187.

a confrontation, a mutual understanding and forgiveness, in a way that Victor never did.⁹⁹ Walton notes that, as he hung over Victor's coffin, "one vast hand was extended",¹⁰⁰ the same hand he had extended to Victor on the night of his creation, and that Victor had refused the touch he had craved since his birth. He speaks now to Victor with a tender reproach, he calls him "generous and self-devoted" and expresses his wish to be forgiven which indicates he himself has forgiven Victor, but even now Victor has abandoned him, he has doomed his imploration to be met with unsympathetic silence, rendered more heavy and hostile by Walton's offences. Victor has managed to poison Walton's mind so that he is convinced of the creature being wholly evil before even meeting him. When he does meet him what little compassion Walton might have had is immediately torn away by the memory of what Victor told him: "I was at first touched by the expressions of his misery; yet when I called to mind what Frankenstein had said of his powers of eloquence and persuasion, and when I again cast my eyes on the lifeless form of my friend, indignation was rekindled within me."¹⁰¹ In addition, he addresses the creator as a daemon and a monster. The creature reveals to Walton that after Clerval's death, he was left heartbroken and felt pity for Victor but his anger and need for vengeance were once again reawakened when he learned of Victor's marriage. "When I discovered that he, the author at once of my existence and of its unspeakable torments, dared to hope for happiness"¹⁰². The creature's vengeance is not one born out of the simple desire to make Victor suffer for his own enjoyment, the creature does not rejoice in hurting Victor, it is one born out of the wish to render him as miserable as he is, in order to make him understand his sorrow. The creature seeks to create understanding between himself and Victor, not to destroy him but only render him as miserable as he is.

When *Frankenstein* was published one of the concerns of the reviewers was that Shelley did not moralize through her story, one critic commented that the story "incalculates no lesson of conduct, manners, or morality"¹⁰³. This is not true as there was a lesson to be learned from the novel, simply not in the way they might have expected it to be displayed. Through allowing the readers to see her characters free of any judgment from the author she allows them to come to their own conclusions, they may realise the implications against the romantic egotistical tendencies she is displaying through Victor, or they may choose to ignore them if they so wish. She does not moralize by way of condemning her characters, for doing that would be to betray them, to betray the liberty she has given

⁹⁹ Margarita Carretero González, "The Posthuman that Could Have Been: Mary Shelley's Creature.", *Relations Beyond Anthropocentrism*, Vol.4, N.1 (2016): pp. 53-64.

¹⁰⁰ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 187.

¹⁰¹ *Idem*, p. 188.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*.

¹⁰³ Mary Poovey, *op. cit.*, pp. 333.

them throughout the novel and her own intent, that of not passing malevolent judgment over them. Shelley's empathetic tendencies, motherly tendencies, over her creations is lost in this way of criticism, for it is then added that "it fatigues the feeling without interesting the understanding; it gratuitously harasses the heart, and only adds to the store, already too great, of painful sensation."¹⁰⁴ This kind of viewpoint does not allow the reader to fully understand the characters and so the meaning of the story is lost on them, for in all of its anguish Frankenstein is, at the very core, a love story, a story of humanity and of hope.

2.3 Hope as a prelude to catastrophe

The miserable state Victor has been reduced to is in deep contrast with his life before the creation, as he retells his life to Walton he lingers on many happy memories. The feelings and words he describes at the beginning are used less and less as his story unfolds: "No creature could have had more tender parents than mine"¹⁰⁵ "No youth could have passed more happily than mine"¹⁰⁶. Again, we are presented with the reality that Victor had all he means to be happy, his familial love was the source of his comfort and joy when he was younger. The act of the creation was horrible but perhaps the outcome would have been different if he could have loved it. Despite the abandonment the creature always had hope, however frail it might have been, and he never gave up on Victor.¹⁰⁷ The circumstances of Victor's ambition, as recounted by him, seem to be accidental. He blames the discovery of natural philosophy, not himself, he chooses to believe it was an accidental cause which led him down his path. His discovery of natural philosophy is to blame rather than what he chose to do with the knowledge he acquired.¹⁰⁸ He discovers the works of Cornelius Agrippa and blames his father for not having taken the time to explain their obsolescence. He says if he had taken the time to explain why Agrippa's theories had been disproved "it is even possible, that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin".¹⁰⁹ Everything seems to be a coincidence and none of it is his fault. Victor fancies himself being the victim of a cruel fate, because if he was subject to fate, something out of his control, then he cannot be held accountable for what happened and is, essentially, blameless.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁵ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 19.

¹⁰⁶ *Idem*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁷ Jeanne M. Britton, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–22.

¹⁰⁸ Joyce Carol Oates, "Frankenstein's Fallen Angel.", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 10, N. 3, (1984): pp. 543–54.

¹⁰⁹ *Idem* p.23

Victor recounts, that when he was fifteen, he witnessed a violent storm, he says he watched with “curiosity and delight”.¹¹⁰ It is the concept of the sublime, one of the greatest romantic ideals, witnessing something terrible but being engaged and feeling excited at the sight because you are safe. Victor is watching a violent storm but he is safe inside. But it is a dark version of the sublime, the storm is the event that will spark his interest in the secret of life. The sublime is not displayed in its “proper” function because Shelley explodes the ideas at the basis of these romantic tendencies.¹¹¹

“As I stood at the door, on a sudden I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak, which stood about twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanishes, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump”¹¹²

“The catastrophe of this tree excited my extreme astonishment”¹¹³ he uses the word catastrophe, which is fitting, it was his catastrophe as well, the excitement this incident stirred in him lead him down the path of his own destruction. He worked hard and devoted nearly two years of his life to the creation of his creature. His hopes and dreams drove him forwards, but in the creation of his creature he himself starts losing his humanity¹¹⁴, he dispends all his energies into the making of this creature, to bestow life to him, while progressively abandoning his, preferring to work on the project instead of focusing on his relationships, disrupting the regulation of his social life. Victor is at first extremely gratified with his studies and overjoyed “The astonishment which I had at first experienced on this discovery soon gave place to delight and rapture. After so much time spent in painful labour, to arrive at once at the summit of my desires, was the most gratifying consummation of my toils”¹¹⁵. The discovery of the secret of life is his point of no return, he is far too self-gratified “what had been the study and desire of the wisest men since the creation of the world was now within my grasp”.¹¹⁶ Victor’s hope is what sets him up for all the suffering he will endure, his excitement quickly turns to despair after the creation. “How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch who, with such infinite pains and care, I had endeavoured to form?”¹¹⁷ The fall from godlike

¹¹⁰ *Idem* p.24

¹¹¹ Joyce Carol Oates, *op. cit.*, pp.543-554.

¹¹² Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 24.

¹¹³ *Ibidem*

¹¹⁴ Joyce Carol Oates, *op. cit.*, pp.543-554.

¹¹⁵ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 34.

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*

¹¹⁷ *Idem*, p. 39.

self-confidence to despair is a very quick one “[...] now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart”.¹¹⁸

After meeting with the creature Victor is briefly touched by his story and is persuaded to create a companion for him, after the creature promises that if he does, they will both leave and live secluded from society. The prospect of a companion represents the creature’s hopes, he is convinced that another creature like him is going to be the only other being not to disdain him. He hopes that together they will be able to live a tranquil life, free of judgement, away from. The creature’s hopes depend on Victor, who, tragically, does not keep his word. When composing the creature he is suddenly seized by the anxiety that together they might indulge in more cruelty or that the second creature might reject his first, bringing him back to his current state of despair and loneliness. After pondering on these thoughts, very briefly indeed, Victor makes his second biggest mistake, he destroys his second creature, right in front of his first. “The wretch saw me destroy the creature on whose future existence he depended for happiness, and with a howl of devilish despair and revenge, withdrew”.¹¹⁹ This is a catalyst, it is the second betrayal he commits towards the creature, the first being his abandonment. He is aware he is destroying the hopes of the creature and that it will seek revenge, but he proceeds anyway. Once again, Victor fails to see beyond the apparent threat, he only thinks the creature will be after him. Victor shatters the hopes of the creature and, just like he doomed himself to a state of despair after abandoning him, he now tears away his last lifeline and hope. In shattering the creature’s hopes of a new start, of love, of happiness, he destroys all of these things for himself as well. It might have well been his own hands strangling Elizabeth on their wedding night, for in demolishing the creature’s bride he is unknowingly killing his own.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ *Ibidem*

¹¹⁹ *Idem*, p. 139.

¹²⁰ Oates, Joyce Carol, *op. cit.*, pp.543-554.

3. Hope is a silent killer

“Something whispers to me not to depend too much on the prospect that is opened before us”- Elizabeth¹²¹

The feelings of anxiety, which trace the novel of Frankenstein, are present in all of Shelley's stories, they are the means by which she voices her own concerns with the hopeful ideas inspired by romanticism.¹²² Her novels contain criticisms towards romantic attitudes and ideals, which lead, inevitably, to disappointment and sorrow.¹²³ The moment of catastrophe, the crumbling of hope and the fall into despair are always very sudden in all of her novels, hope is the preceding symptom of catastrophe. The death of hope equals the death of the dream, the harsh re-awakening into a life surrounded by ruins. The poets are gifted with genius and aspirations but their overly optimistic nature blind them to the signs of tragedy. Mary had stepped more than willingly into this life, led by romantic and youthfully naïve ideals. but as the veil starts coming off, she becomes progressively disillusioned, her detachment from the optimism of her friends and husband incrementing her role as an omniscient outsider. From the moment of the reawakening, she sees the flaws and the perils of those ideas, and both her and the creature see the hypocrisy within it. Shelley's characters are outsiders in one form or another, and they endure, like her. The creature is abandoned by society and Mathilda lives secluded in the woods after her father's death. Lionel, the character that most represents Shelley, is doomed to become the last man on earth.

Even after destroying his second creature Victor still held on to a feeble hope, it is because he is recounting his story in retrospective that the sense of doom is amplified. When telling Walton of Elizabeth's letter he comments that, “Some softened feelings stole into my heart, and dared to whisper paradisiacal dreams of love and joy; but the apple was already eaten, and the angel's arm bared to drive me from all hope”¹²⁴. When he and Elizabeth sail on the lake, he says those were his last moments of happiness, but, amongst, the apparent tranquillity their anxieties make way into the conversation. Victor remarks that Elizabeth does not seem happy and she replies: “Something whispers to me not to depend too much on the prospect that is opened before us; but I will not listen to such a sinister voice.”¹²⁵ These moments of apparent tranquillity are utilized by Shelley as a prelude to the catastrophic events that will follow. Elizabeth remarks it was a serene day and nature seemed “happy”¹²⁶. There is a contrast between the scene of natural tranquillity, their apparent happiness and

¹²¹ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 163.

¹²² Mary Poovey, *op. cit.*, pp. 332-347.

¹²³ Joyce Carol Oates, *op. cit.*, pp.543-554.

¹²⁴ *Idem*, p. 159.

¹²⁵ *Idem*, p. 163.

¹²⁶ *Idem*, p. 163.

that the tragedy that is about to unfold. The natural scene is described in detail; it is a consolation but a deceitful and temporary solution. “The sun sunk beneath the horizon as we landed; and as I touched the shore, I felt those cares and fears revive, which soon were to clasp me, and cling to me for ever”.¹²⁷

Elizabeth’s death is the last great tragedy for Victor, he describes it as the destruction of his “best hope”¹²⁸ and says he should have perished then but that “life is obstinate, and clings closest where it is most hated”¹²⁹. Victor faints and recovers to find himself surrounded by a crowd of people, upon seeing their faces he remarks, “The horror of others appeared only as a mockery, a shadow of the feelings that oppressed me”.¹³⁰ Shelley’s characters cannot find consolation amongst others because no one can truly understand them. People’s sympathy and their concern, while perhaps with the best of intention, is irritating and oppressing to them. When sailing with Elizabeth, when they both held on to a feeble hope, nature seemed to reflect their mood. However, as soon as he tries to reach his father, worried that the creature might want to kill him too, nature becomes hostile, with heavy winds and rain¹³¹.

3.1 *Conversations with ghosts in Mathilda*

The scene of Victor rushing to his father in unfavourable weather is similar to that of Mathilda rushing after her own father amongst a storm. In Shelley’s novels nature is a bystander on which the characters project their emotions in order to validate them. They wrongfully attribute to nature the power of having ill or good intentions when really it is the work of their own fancy. Mathilda recognizes that when pursuing her father she was being superstitious and letting her own fancy influence her. After Mathilda reads her father’s letter she endeavours to follow him, she has understood his intention to commit suicide and is determined to stop him. “Hope only supported me, the hope that I should not be too late”¹³². Once again, hope is portrayed as a deceiving sentiment, it deceives her and leads her forward in an effort that is destined to end tragically. When Mathilda pursues her father she passes through a forest in the midst of a tremendous thunderstorm, again, the idea of the sublime does not fit into Shelley’s works.¹³³ Mathilda is not inside, merely looking upon the thunders with frightful curiosity, she is actively part of the terrific natural scene, she is going half mad with a mixture of hope

¹²⁷ *Idem*, p. 164.

¹²⁸ *Idem*, p. 165.

¹²⁹ *Ibidem*

¹³⁰ *Ibidem*

¹³¹ *Idem*, p. 167.

¹³² Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, Penguin Books, New York, 2016, p. 57.

¹³³ Joyce Carol Oates, *op. cit.*, pp.543-554.

and anxiety. The scene surrounding her is dark and frightening, she briefly stops to behold an okay before it is blasted down by lightning. Upon seeing the wreck she gives in to her fears and reflects on the possibility of her father's death.

“I sunk on the wet earth; [...] alone in a large meadow stood a magnificent oak; the lightnings shewed its myriad boughs torn by the storm. A strange idea seized me; a person must have felt all the agonies of doubt concerning the life and death of one who is the whole world to them before they can enter into my feelings”¹³⁴

The image of the lightning bolt is one that is repeated in *Frankenstein* and in other works of Shelley, she seems to be fascinated with this concept, she uses the metaphor multiple times. At first it is the spark of hope and ambition for Victor, then it is the realization of his failure.¹³⁵ The life force of the lightning, which once represented life has turned on him and now represents his doom. In *Mathilda* the stroke of lightning appears as an ominous signal, an omen of death and the image she uses to describe her despair. When she sees the tree blasted down by a bolt of lightning, she takes it to mean her father is dead. Though, in retrospective, she reflects on her thought and realizes it was her own imagination “for in that state, the mind working unrestrained by the will makes strange and fanciful combinations with outward circumstances and weaves the chances and changes of nature into an immediate connection with the event they dread”.¹³⁶ She is conscious that she is projecting her feelings onto nature, and trying to find signs where, rationally, there are none, as nature is simply a bystander. Being in a state of what she calls “superstition” she then says that if the next thunder misses the oak her father shall be alive, no sooner does she speak these words that the oak is struck down. Nature give no form of consolation to her in this moment. Her feelings mirror those of the weather outside, she is frantic, feverish, and half-mad with preoccupation, pondering on the constant thought of her father dying.

Mathilda's love is limited to a select few, her father is the object of her obsession just as much as she is his.¹³⁷ After having spent all of her life with her aunt the reunion with her father seems to her the event that will erase all her past miseries and plunge in eternal happiness. She says she had begun to hope, yet, her hope will prove to be deceitful, and the moment of catastrophe sudden and unexpected. "There are no degrees which could break my fall from happiness to misery; it was as the stroke of lightning- sudden and entire."¹³⁸ Mathilda enjoys her father's company unaware that he is

¹³⁴ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p. 60.

¹³⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, *op. cit.*, pp.543-554.

¹³⁶ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p. 60.

¹³⁷ Margaret Davenport Garrett, “Writing and Re-Writing Incest in Mary Shelley's ‘*Mathilda*.’” *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 45, (1996): pp. 44–60.

¹³⁸ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p. 25.

harbouring incestuous feelings towards her, but she harbours her own obsession towards him, she has no interest in other people and wants to spend the entirety of her time in his company. She comments that: “It was a subject of regret to me whenever we were joined by a third person”.¹³⁹ Shelley attempts to portray the risks of an unhealthy attachment to one single person, and the moral responsibility one feels as a consequence, a hint at her own anxieties and relationships.¹⁴⁰ The introduction of a young man, an unwanted third person, is the catalyst for her and her father’s relationship. When we are presented with Mathilda’s suitor, the scene is very different from what it should be, it is distorted, it is the scene that sets in motion her father’s jealousy and sparks the conflict between them. The suitor is an element of wreckage and Mathilda is uncomfortable in this social situation, we might see a hint of autobiography here, just as Percy Shelley sparked conflict between Mary and her own father. Mary’s father was disappointed by her decision to elope with a married man, and this caused tension between them when she came back to England. Her father was angered with her and refused to reconnect with her for quite some time.¹⁴¹ Mary is unable to depict the suitor in the conventional *romantic* way, and what should be a cause of joy for a young girl of high social standing such as Mathilda, turns out to be the very beginning of her tragedy. Mary and Percy certainly did not follow the conventional rules of courtship; their love was much more adventurous and spontaneous, so perhaps Mary found the conventional courtship too bothersome and tedious. The art of conversation in groups, is lost in Mathilda, where most things happen in the secrecy of her own thoughts or in the intimate conversation between no more than two people. Though she is from the upper class she does not wish to partake in their habits, Mary herself would rather go through life with a select few of her own choosing. Mathilda feels her relatives and other acquaintances to be useless additions to her and her father’s life. People are so oppressing to her that after her father’s death she decides to quit society. She prepares her escape after faking her own death and mentions how she sometimes doubted her plan, but then swiftly adds: “When remorse at being the contriver of any cheat made me shrink from my design I was irresistibly led back and confirmed in it by the visit of some aunt or cousin”.¹⁴² Family visits are a burden to Mathilda. Her relatives speak of her father having gone mad and this irks her, these comments are not made openly but rather “Whispered so and so, in dark hint soft and low”¹⁴³ and “with downcast eyes, and sympathizing smiles or whimpers”¹⁴⁴. The conversations are unbearable to Mathilda who perceives them to be false, in her pained state she cannot relate to her

¹³⁹ *Idem*, cit., p. 24.

¹⁴⁰ Margaret Davenport Garrett, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–60.

¹⁴¹ See Pamela Clemit, “The legacies of Godwin and Wollstonecraft”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed: Esther Schor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 26–44.

¹⁴² Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p. 66.

¹⁴³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

family and partake in their mundane activities. There is an element of dysfunctional familial relationships in Shelley's works, it is very present in *Frankenstein* as well, though in different ways. Victor is too involved in his work to socialize with this family and his very creation is what renders him unable to connect with them from then on.¹⁴⁵

After her father distances himself from her Mathilda tries in every way to discover the reason behind his sudden change. When she can no longer bear his coldness towards her she confronts him, but this confrontation forces her to face the reality of a terrible secret that will forever change the path of her life and disrupt their familial stability. Confiding the incestuous love he feels for her he bestows upon her a secret that will forever doom her to a state of alienation. "It was despair I felt; for the first time that phantom seized me; the first time and only time for it has never since left me".¹⁴⁶ The tragic events of Shelley's novels are always preceded by deceitful short moments of happiness and hope. After this illusory moment of happiness, catastrophe strikes, the moment in which agony clings to them and will never leave them. The agony that drives the characters to a state of alienation and solitude. The moment of tranquillity is always broken very suddenly, Mathilda says her hope proved to be a "bubble"¹⁴⁷, it describes the easiness with which it broke. After her father's death, people try to console her but she finds no consolation among the living "[I] was uneasy when I saw a human creature near me."¹⁴⁸ Her consolers are oppressing and a presence which she feels she has to escape.

A few weeks pass, she stays with her relatives in London but their presence and their attempts to comfort her are distorted in Mathilda's mind. In her pained state she cannot reconcile with familial affection in a healthy way. She recognizes that her sorrow is the source of her inability to partake in society and she recounts of the weeks in London as weeks of madness. When she starts feeling better she feels detached from reality and from the people surrounding her, she wishes to remain unbothered in her grief and mourning. She is determined to suffer religiously. "I was for ever forming plans how I might hereafter contrive to escape the tortures that were prepared for me when I should mix in society, and to find that solitude which alone could suit one whom an untold grief separated from her fellow creatures"¹⁴⁹. In *Frankenstein*, Victor recounts: "I saw an insurmountable barrier placed between me and my fellow-men; this barrier was sealed with the blood of William and Justine". They both believe they are partially responsible for the deaths of their loved ones. Mathilda's sense of isolation is caused by the grief of her father's death and of the secret she keeps, a secret she feels she

¹⁴⁵ Mary Poovey, *op. cit.*, pp. 332-347.

¹⁴⁶ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p. 42

¹⁴⁷ *Idem*, p. 66.

¹⁴⁸ *Idem*, p. 63.

¹⁴⁹ *Idem*, p. 64

cannot share with anyone, just as Victor cannot bring himself to speak with anyone about the circumstances of the deaths of William and Justine.

Who can be more solitary even in a crowd than one whose history and the never ending feelings and remembrances arising from it is known to no living soul. There was too deep a horror in my tale for confidence; I was on earth the sole depository of my own secret. I might tell it to the winds and the desert heaths but I must never among my fellow creature, either by word or look give allowance to the smallest conjecture of the dread reality: I must shrink before the eye of man lest he should read my father's guilt in my glazed eyes: I must be silent lest my faltering voice should betray unimagined horrors.¹⁵⁰

Thus, Mathilda resolves to isolate herself, she develops a repulsion towards all which might be a semblance of a life. She initially thinks of isolating herself though death but then resolves that she must not die "I dared not die even though the cold grave held all I loved"¹⁵¹ and settles instead on a substitute for death, a "death-like solitude."¹⁵² All this suffering has made Mathilda weary, heavy and tired. The tiredness that comes from such tragic events is a tiredness of life. Mathilda resolves to seek quiet and solitude with her only interlocutor being her father's spirit, she chooses to live inside a houses of memories. Even when he was still alive, after his confession, she described him as wretched and restless like an "unlaid ghost"¹⁵³ and from then on he will prove to truly be a ghost, hovering above her forever. She chases him because conversing with ghosts does not require the same degree of effort that interacting with the living does.

I might feign death, and thus escape from my comforters; they will believe me united to my father, and so indeed I shall be. For alone, when no voice can disturb my dream, and no cold eye meet mine to check its fire, then I may commune with his spirit, on a lone heath, at noon or at midnight, still I should be near him.¹⁵⁴

She chooses the irrational comfort of her memories rather than the living comforters she might find in her relatives because people are an overbearing presence, but the ghost of her father is a quiet and comforting one. "In solitude only shall I be myself; in solitude I shall be thine".¹⁵⁵ There is comfort in a conversation with a, it takes a great resolve to leave that imaginary and re-join the offices

¹⁵⁰ *Ibidem*

¹⁵¹ *Idem*, p. 65.

¹⁵² *Ibidem*

¹⁵³ *Idem*, p. 47.

¹⁵⁴ *Idem*, p. 65.

¹⁵⁵ *Idem*, p. 67.

of life. Mary Shelley describes this as an illusory happiness, a dark happiness, which, as much as it is macabre, holds allure to the wounded soul. Upon finally escaping her relatives Mathilda is finally able to indulge in her suffering “I lost all this suffering when I was free; when I saw the wild heath around me, and the even star in the west, then I could weep, gently weep, and be at peace”.¹⁵⁶ Two kinds of suffering are described, one amongst others, surrounded by people who do not understand, and one in isolation, with one owns mind, which is sweeter. It is sort of recollection in tranquillity but for one’s personal sorrows.¹⁵⁷ When she is alone the natural scene is described in a completely different manner from that of the storm or the scenery of London. In London she was agitated, when she is finally alone the breeze “plays” with her hair, she enjoys looking at the sunbeams that “glitter” on the waves, she watches the birds and she even sleeps “undisturbed by dreams” and wakes up to a “tranquil freedom”¹⁵⁸.

Mary’s works do not abide by the conventional rules of the romantic and the sublime, nature is not an active source of comfort or consolation to the characters¹⁵⁹, it is merely a reflection of their emotional state, unless the characters are at peace nature is only another source of discomfort, a taunting presence. It is so because Mary turns a sceptical eye on the romantic celebration of nature.¹⁶⁰ Shelley advances criticism both to the romantic power of imagination and the healing power of nature.¹⁶¹ The beneficial effect of nature, which in romantic ideals is crucial to the maturation of self-confidence, is not present in *Frankenstein* because Victor has upset the laws of nature.¹⁶² Imagination leads Victor to discard the moral sense of virtue, it gives space instead to his egotistical tendencies to express himself in an immoral way. Since Victor has already betrayed the power of imagination, nature cannot perform its usual beneficial role. Therefore, nature does not reinforce virtue, since it has already been compromised, and cannot reflect positive or impart beneficial feelings to the dweller.¹⁶³ It can only mirror the subconscious state the characters find themselves in, which is often turmoil or anxiety, it is a taunting echo of their miseries. Personal sorrows surface in a rejection and problematization of nature and the idea of the sublime. In *Mathilda*, nature does not possess healing powers of its own, it is neither good nor evil, it simply echoes back the subconscious of the character. When Mathilda is in a state of despair nature is seen as an antagonist, although it never is. It has no

¹⁵⁶ *Idem*, p. 69.

¹⁵⁷ Omotoyosi E. Odukamaiya, "The Dialects of Solitude: Understanding Mary Shelley’s Depictions of Solitude in Select Novels”, *An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal*, Vol. 3, N.4, (2020): pp. 10-25.

¹⁵⁸ *Idem*, p. 70.

¹⁵⁹ Joyce Carol Oates, *op. cit.*, pp.543-554.

¹⁶⁰ Anne K. Mellor, *op. cit.*, pp.9-25.

¹⁶¹ Mary Poovey, *op. cit.*, pp. 332-347.

¹⁶² *Idem*, pp. 332-347.

¹⁶³ *Idem*, pp. 332-347.

active role, it is simply a passive companion, a mirror of her soul. Only when she is at peace, at the end of the novel, does she find a sympathetic companion in nature and is able to enjoy its newfound beauty and healing powers. Mathilda initially cursed nature for her sorrows but as she is about to die she makes her peace with it, forgiving and acknowledging that nature did not play a part in her sufferings. She acknowledges that she needed to find a culprit for her pain and wrongfully accused nature.

In the woods, although her intention was of being alone, Mathilda meets a young man, Woodville: “He was a Poet. That name has so often been degraded that it will not convey the idea of all that he was”.¹⁶⁴ Woodville is the embodiment of Percy Shelley and of his idealistic optimism.¹⁶⁵ He is described as a poet, admired by everyone, a mentor to his fiancé Elinor like Percy was to Mary. He, too, like Mathilda, seeks solitude and peace in the woods. He is wounded by the loss of his fiancé, who died from an illness some months prior to his meeting with Mathilda. He shares his story with her, he tells Mathilda about their relationship and of her sickness. He recounts how, when he rushed to Elinor, he was deceived by his hopes, like Mathilda rushing to her father’s rescue.

To learn that she was still in being, and that he might still hope was an alleviation to him. He remembered the words of her letter and he indulged the wild idea that his kisses breathing warm love and life would infuse new spirit into her, and that with him near she could not die; that his presence was the talisman of her life¹⁶⁶

He “indulged” in a wild idea, there is one last moment of hope, but it torn away as quickly as it came. However, the main difference between Woodville and Mathilda is that he perceives his sorrow to be temporary; while Mathilda is determined that she will forever play the part of the mourning victim. Because of their difference in perception she finds it hard to relate to Woodville’s words, she says she had been hardened too much by her misery. When life seems to become too unbearable, even in her solitude, Mathilda proposes a joint suicide to Woodville, to which he does not agree, precisely because he knows he will re-join society and life. “Believe me, I will never desert life until this last hope is torn from my bosom.”¹⁶⁷ He tries to persuade her in following his intention with a poetic discourse on hope, love and the positive reinforcement of participation in society, following the style of Percy Shelley.¹⁶⁸ “Hope, and reassure your steps, and take hope to guide you. Hope, and your

¹⁶⁴ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p.75.

¹⁶⁵ Pamela Clemit, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-44.

¹⁶⁶ *Idem*, p. 80.

¹⁶⁷ *Idem*, p. 96.

¹⁶⁸ Tilottama Rajan, “Mary Shelley’s *Mathilda*: Melancholy and the Political Economy of Romanticism”, *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 26, No. 1/2, (Baltimore, 1994): pp. 43–68.

wounds will be already half healed: but if you obstinately despair, there never more will be comfort for you".¹⁶⁹

In spite of his best efforts, Woodville is unable to reach her because Mathilda is a flawed character. Despite Shelley not condemning her, just like she does not any of her characters, and even describing with accuracy her reasons and feelings, we are to understand that she is not wholly reasonable in her decisions. The reader needs to see past Mathilda's personal feelings and beliefs.¹⁷⁰ In keeping religiously to her grief and continuously casting aside Woodville's advice Mathilda is refusing to follow the advice of a character who effectively embodies Percy Shelley. This might be a sign of estrangement and bitterness Mary felt towards him at that time of her life.¹⁷¹ Mathilda has an extreme attachment to grief; she thinks she would desecrate her feelings and her father's memory if she should participate again in life. It is worth noting Mary wrote this novel after the loss of her two children, so Mathilda's feelings might be her own.¹⁷² She struggles in trying to make her present potential happiness coexist with wanting to honour the memory of her past, so always eventually plunges back in despair, because it is familiar, sweet, and much more comfortable than the efforts required to move on.

Woodville speaks wise words that Mathilda does not accept completely. Both Woodville and Mathilda are written by Shelley, she is effectively in conversation with herself, speaking of her feelings, explaining her reasons, giving Mathilda the advice she knows to be true but refuses to accept. Mathilda is unable to discern her father's faults from her own. As pure as her love for her father is Shelley wishes us to be critical of Mathilda's unchanged and devoted loyalty to him. Though she keeps describing him with affection and praise, her father is certainly at fault. Mathilda is an unreliable narrator, she is too devoted to a flawed father. Like Victor, she fancies herself to be a victim, having lost her father, whom she considers her only love. Her fault is her inability to recognize her father's wrongs and to move forward, to attain happiness for herself. Mathilda's chaotic state of mind mirrors that of Shelley. She had been disowned by her own father, lost two children and felt alienated from her husband. Like Mathilda, she was unable to discern her faults from those of other's. Mathilda is the mirror image of the inexperienced and victimised Shelley.¹⁷³ Mathilda's self-victimization is purposefully exaggerated, her drama and the questionable role she has cast herself in

¹⁶⁹ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p. 100.

¹⁷⁰ Charlene E. Bunnell, "'Mathilda': Mary Shelley's Romantic Tragedy." *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 46, (1997), pp. 75–96.

¹⁷¹ Elizabeth Nitchie, "Mary Shelley's 'Mathilda': An Unpublished Story and Its Biographical Significance." *Studies in Philology*, vol. 40, N. 3, (1943): pp. 447–462.

¹⁷² Elizabeth Nitchie, *op. cit.*, pp.447-462.

¹⁷³ Diana Edelman-Young, "'Kingdom of Shadows': Intimations of Desire in Mary Shelley's 'Mathilda.'" *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 51, (2002): pp. 116–44.

are meant to invite criticism from the reader.¹⁷⁴ Woodville always speaks in a way which resembles Shelley, his influence on her definitely helped her grow and realize her worth. The reader, who is obviously in a less emotive state than Mathilda, can see beyond her desires. The reader is presented with Mathilda's feelings and beliefs but acknowledges their limit. Mathilda believes she is destined to suffer, that she deserves it in some degree. The reader can hold on to Woodville's words much better than Mathilda, who is blinded by her sorrows.

Before dying she asks forgiveness to nature and acknowledges that she had found, at one point, in it an enemy, when it never was. Nature is a companion when the characters are tranquil, like Victor on the lake and Mathilda in her youth and in the moment of her death, and is antagonized when they are anxious. At the end of the novel, when she is writing to Woodville, she realizes nature cannot be responsible for one's tragedies, she makes peace with it and only looks upon it with a tender melancholy.¹⁷⁵

When thinking of her own death, she is actually serene and manages to rekindle with nature. Both Mathilda and Victor were at peace with the thought of their own death, or the thought of isolating themselves to keep the people they loved safe. After hearing her father's confession, Mathilda resolves to run away, she is at peace with this decision, but is devastated by her father's suicide. Victor, too, was at peace with the thought of isolating himself, he was at peace when he thought he was about to die, and he was tranquil when he actually did die on Walton's ship. He was, however, utterly devastated by Elizabeth's death. Like Mathilda, he is peaceful and accepting in the thought of his own death but feels responsible for the feelings of Elizabeth, he does not wish to know her mourning and sad, like Mathilda does not wish to cause sorrow to Woodville, she says she is grateful she is not with her so he will not grieve. When Victor's mother is dying, she says

I regret that I am taken from you; and, happy and beloved as I have been, is it not hard to quit you all? But these are not thoughts befitting me; I will endeavour to resign myself cheerfully to death, and will indulge a hope of meeting you in another world.¹⁷⁶

This is very different from Victor's death, she says she is sad to go because she is sad to leave them, but Victor has no one he will be sad to leave for everyone he loves is already dead, much like Mathilda comments that it is the cold grave that holds all she loves.¹⁷⁷ Victor welcomes death as a

¹⁷⁴ Melina Moore, "Mary Shelley's 'Mathilda' and the Struggle for Female Narrative Subjectivity." *Rocky Mountain Review*, Vol. 65, N. 2, (2011): pp. 208- 215.

¹⁷⁵ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p. 105.

¹⁷⁶ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 26.

¹⁷⁷ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p. 65.

consolation and an ending to his sufferings. The kind of feeling Shelley's characters have towards death express the kind of life they led, the kind of hopes they have. Victor's mother is sad to leave them, she hopes she will see them again in another world; Victor is relieved to finally die. Woodville was horrified by Mathilda's proposal of a joint suicide, he still had hopes in the world, a mother to love and the prospect of bestowing happiness to others, he did not want to die. Mathilda, instead, welcomes death peacefully when it comes, like Victor, for her it is an end to her miseries.

For long years these are the first days of peace that have visited me. I no longer exhaust my miserable heart by bitter tears and frantic complaints; I no longer reproach the sun, the earth, the air, for pain and wretchedness. I wait in quiet expectation for the closing hours of a life which has been to me most sweet and bitter¹⁷⁸

Mathilda addresses a lengthy monologue to nature; she is asking that nature be kind to her now in death and she is forgiving it. Mathilda is truly complacent with the idea of her own death, happy even, as she recounts her life, a story, which she perceives to be a drama, acted on the stage that is the world.¹⁷⁹ It gives her joy to linger on the details and scene of her very last moments on earth. "In truth I am in love with death; no maiden ever took more pleasure in the contemplation of her bridal attire than I in fancying my limbs already enwrapped in their shroud: is it not my marriage dress?"¹⁸⁰ Whilst Mathilda fails to be comforted by Woodville's words and reconcile with life Shelley keeps honouring her feelings, showing the reader that, though she may be lost in the spiral of her feelings, in her mind her resolutions make sense, that it could not have been otherwise, that she could not have been a different or better character. Mathilda feels as though she does not belong to the realm of the living, ghosts were to her better companions than most living beings ever were. Unlike Woodville she does not wish to re-join society, the only person she wants to re-join is her father. "The turf will soon be green on my grave; and the violets will bloom on it. *There* is my hope and my expectation"¹⁸¹

3.2 *A Relic of Romanticism: The Last Man*

"[...] cling to some vain imagination or deceitful hope which will soon be buried in the ruins"- Lionel¹⁸²

¹⁷⁸ *Idem*, p. 107.

¹⁷⁹ Kathleen A. Miller, "'The Remembrance Haunts Me like a Crime': Narrative Control, the Dramatic, and the Female Gothic in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's 'Mathilda.'" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 27, N. 2, (2008): pp. 291–308.

¹⁸⁰ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p. 107.

¹⁸¹ *Idem*, p. 110.

¹⁸² Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford, 2008, p. 435.

In the *Last Man* Shelley matures from seeing herself as subjected to fate to being able to decide upon the outcomes of her life. Even the very start of the novel presents a hopeful message, that Lionel's story was found. An anonymous narrator found Lionel's story inscribed on sibylline leaves in a cave near Naples and adapted it in novel form.¹⁸³ By means of having found Lionel's story Shelley is publishing her own. In this novel Shelley once again voices her concerns towards the over optimistic ideals characteristic of romanticism¹⁸⁴. Shelley suffered immeasurably in just a few years, so her being weary of the optimism and hopes of her companions is understandable. Shelley and Byron were poets bestowed with the infallible optimism of their age, the idea that the poet was immortal and invincible. Mary sees many of the limits her companions were blinded to, she has a deeper and more objective way to look at the world, one brought about by her suffering.¹⁸⁵ Mary's isolation and her role as bystander to tragedy made her feel like a relict of a generation that had dared to hope too much, too idealistic. Romanticism leads man to death and she almost condemns it. Shelley's personal sorrows transmute into a global pandemic in the *Last Man*.¹⁸⁶

“Yes I may well describe that solitary being's feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before”.¹⁸⁷ These are the words Shelley wrote in her journal when writing *The Last Man*. After Percy's tragic death in 1822 Mary returned to England with her only surviving son Percy Florence, she had been reluctant to leave Italy, a place where she had been happy but also grieved. Leaving Italy would have meant living behind the life she had led there with her husband and their children.¹⁸⁸ Her life in Italy was marked by great tragedies, out of her four children two had died in Italy, with one having previously died in England, and it was the last place she lived in with her husband. She must have felt immensely lonely for some time, many of the people she knew and loved died in a short span of time, Keats died in 1821 and Percy in 1822 and only a few years later Byron died in Greece. She also felt a certain degree of guilt towards Percy, they had not been on the best of terms before his death and her friends were commenting bitterly on her coldness.¹⁸⁹ The thought that Percy should have fought her distance pained her deeply, in her journal, after his

¹⁸³ Yasmin Solomonescu, "Mary Shelley's Fascinations: The Last Man." *Modern Philology*, Vol.114, N.3, (2017) pp. 702-725.

¹⁸⁴ Anne K. Mellor, *op. cit.*, pp.9-25.

¹⁸⁵ Lee Sterrenburg, "The Last Man: Anatomy of Failed Revolutions." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 33, N. 3, (1978): pp. 324-47.

¹⁸⁶ See Carlo Pagetti, "City of the Dead": morte a Costantinopoli in *The Last Man* di Mary Shelley", in *Bisanzio fra Tradizione e Modernità*, ed: Fabrizio Conca, Carla Castelli, Ledizioni, 2017, pp. 131-138.

¹⁸⁷ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man (Introduction)*, cit, p. vii.

¹⁸⁸ Charlotte Gordon, *op. cit.*, 465.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibidem*

death, she wrote “It is not true that this heart was cold to thee...”¹⁹⁰ Her personal sorrows found their culmination in her novel *The Last Man*, an expression of her melancholy where past and present intertwine.¹⁹¹

The last man is embedded with biographical information of Shelley and her circle, it is almost an anti-romantic manifest, but one that is written in the most romantic of ways because of Shelley’s visceral and emotional style of writing. Within it Shelley re-creates a little band of elect of which she had once been a part of, idealizing the past and envisioning a future of horror that mirrored her own feelings of devastation.¹⁹² The main characters in her novel all have a real life correspondent in one of her companions, and the very protagonist is her very own reflection. In the society of the novel England has become an oligarchy, Parliament rules the agency of a Protector elected by its members and the Greek war is an ongoing conflict.¹⁹³ Among this ruling group are two figures, which represent Percy Shelley and Lord Byron, respectively: Adrian, Earl of Windsor, and Lord Raymond.¹⁹⁴ The protagonist Lionel Verney comes from outside this political circle, he is a former shepherd boy who is introduced to this social sphere through Adrian’s friendship. The novel explores the theme of power, in both the social and emotional spheres. Raymond is the embodiment of the byronic superiority and charm, Adrian of Percy’s optimism and natural benevolence. Lord Raymond is eventually named Protector but gives up his Protectorship and returns to the Greek wars.¹⁹⁵ It is here that the plague is mentioned for the first time, when the Greek army arrives in Constantinople they find it abandoned, most of the army has died from the plague. Raymond is the only one to enter the city, sealing his tragic fate, he, like his real counterpart, is destined to die in this fight. The failure of imagination is crucial in the novel. In the works of Percy Shelley imagination was the key to redemption, in Mary’s work it creates only deceptive fantasies.¹⁹⁶ When Lionel enters the city in search of Raymond and lets himself believe that he is still alive he is disillusioned. In spring of that year peace has finally been reached and Adrian dreams of a right future. Yet again this hope is deceitful and only directs the characters towards the tragedy that will unfold. The hope of a serene future is compromised because the plague is spreading all over the world. When the plague reaches London Adrian takes the place as the Lord Protector and decides to lead the surviving population out

¹⁹⁰ *Ibidem*

¹⁹¹ Jonathan Elmer, “‘Vaulted Over by the Present’: Melancholy and Sovereignty in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*.”, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 42, N. 2, (2009): pp. 355–359.

¹⁹² Carlo Pagetti, *op. cit.*, 131-138.

¹⁹³ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, cit. ix.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibidem*

¹⁹⁵ Hugh J. Luke, “*The Last Man*: Mary Shelley’s Myth of the Solitary.” *Prairie Schooner*, Vol. 39, N. 4 (1965): pp. 316–327.

¹⁹⁶ Anne K. Mellor, *op. cit.*, pp.9-25.

of England, he chooses Rome as their destination. Eventually the only survivors are Adrian, Lionel, Clara and Evelyn. Their hope is to re-establish the human race once the plague is over. As they sail to Italy they talk about their plans but Evelyn dies of a fever in Como and Adrian, like Percy Shelley, is destined to die in a shipwreck together with Clara, leaving Lionel to become the Last Man. The novel also expresses the failure of art, upon arriving in Rome Lionel attempts to imagine companions from history but he realizes that he cannot find a companion for his desolation.¹⁹⁷

Shelley's life runs sub-text through the entire novel, her poetical intention coexists with her biographical background.¹⁹⁸ In *The Last Man* through the metaphor of the plague, romanticism is shown as the true illness. The last man is almost a manifest against romanticism, it is Shelley's response to her situation of emotional solitude, she expresses her sensations through a labyrinthical prophetic narration. It is the labyrinth of her sorrows, which is forever projected in the future, a never ending pain. Lionel's lonely wondering echoes those of Mary.¹⁹⁹ It is set in the future but moulded after the past, it is her way to express her losses and her pain. The plague represents the revolution and the fall of every human empire, not only the historical ottoman empire described in the novel.²⁰⁰ It is the failure of romanticism.²⁰¹ Lord Raymond, just like Byron, fought in Greece to honour his ideals, and ultimately died for them. He thinks himself invincible but even the noblest of ideas cannot save man, even the greatest poets will succumb to death. These ideals lead men to an overly optimistic self-confidence, thinking themselves invincible, but it is a deception. The veil of romanticism sooner or later fades away to reveal their human frailness. Mary lead an exciting life, but not without a fair share of pain, she never regretted her path but once alone she is no longer protected by this veil. She, alone, has been left to deal with the consequences of this false sense of immortality typical of the poets.²⁰²

Shelley's novels always tackle the problem of voluntary versus involuntary isolation.²⁰³ Mathilda is placid and content in her isolation because she has chosen it; the creature is not because he yearns for the company of others. Lionel is, understandably, wretched at his state of loneliness because it has been forced upon him in an unexpected manner, when only a short time before he had been happy, even if only with a select few. It parallels Shelley's condition, she was always happy in

¹⁹⁷ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, cit. xv.

¹⁹⁸ Melissa Bailes "The Psychologization of Geological Catastrophe in Mary Shelley's "*The Last Man*", *ELH*, Vol. 82, N. 2, (2015): pp. 671–699.

¹⁹⁹ Carlo Pagetti, *op. cit.*, 131-138.

²⁰⁰ Lee Sterrenburg, *op. cit.*, pp. 324–47.

²⁰¹ Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor, "Performing History, Performing Humanity in Mary Shelley's '*The Last Man*.'" *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 42, N. 4, (2002): pp. 753–80.

²⁰² Anne K. Mellor, *op. cit.*, pp.9-25.

²⁰³ Omotoyosi E. Odukomaiya, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-25.

her solitude, amongst the few people she chose to surround herself with²⁰⁴, or even only with Shelley, but finding herself without him was something she could not have foreseen. Despite most of humanity having perished Lionel is still happy at the prospect of being with his few remaining companions. “Though our four hearts alone beat in the world, those four hearts were happy”.²⁰⁵ This trait is one all the characters of Shelley’s first three novels share, the contentment in being in the company of only a select few. As he, Adrian, Clara and Evelyn continue their journey we see the moment of illusory tranquillity, with the plague gone Lionel thinks misery has left too, that they will reach Italy, he does not know what is yet to happen to them. “Recurring scenes of misery and pain, the fruits of this distemper, made no more part of our lives—the word plague no longer rung in our ears”²⁰⁶. *The Last Man* too is recounted from a retrospective point of view; Lionel is recollecting his thoughts of the past in the present so he knows that the hope that they might reform a society in Rome was an illusory one.

When Evelyn dies of a fever in Como they bury him with the greatest tenderness, they locate his body in a place where no one will ever disturb it, under a cypress. While his gesture is devoid of any practical meaning, since, to the best of their knowledge, they are the only people left on earth, it holds great emotional significance. In spite of everything this tenderness and care is not spared, this indulgence in details, the ritual of mourning and the respect for the dead and loved ones. Shelly grew up frequently visiting her mother’s tomb in the graveyard, her father had planted two willows by her grave, and when she and Shelley started courting, they would often meet in the graveyard.²⁰⁷ She was well acquainted with resting places and it is very important for her to honour the memory of the dead. However, they do not indulge forever in their grief, they quit Como after realizing the effects their stay would have on Clara. She tells them “There is something in this scene of transcendent beauty [...] that for ever whisper to me, leave thy cumbrous flesh, and make a part of us.”²⁰⁸ They make an important decision when leaving, they take the decision to part with the place that has been their home for some time because they recognize it is now corrupted by this loss. They choose to part with Evelyn’s ghost and to continue on their journey, to stay among the living.

²⁰⁴ Claire Sheridan, “Anti-social sociability: Mary Shelley and the posthumous “Pisa gang””, *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 52, N.3, (Boston, 2013): pp. 415-435.

²⁰⁵ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, cit., p. 434.

²⁰⁶ *Idem*, p. 435.

²⁰⁷ Florence A. Marshall, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

²⁰⁸ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, cit., p. 436.

This is the decision that Lionel will take even when he is the only one left out of the three survivors. When Clara and Adrian die, Lionel describes with affection a tenderness all that Adrian had meant to him, it is a very strong parallel between the relationship Mary had with Percy.²⁰⁹

I was an untaught shepherd-boy, when Adrian deigned to confer on his friendship. The best years of my life had been passed with him. All I had possessed of this world's goods, of happiness, knowledge, or virtue. I owed to him. He had, in his person, his intellect, and rare qualities, given a glory to my life.²¹⁰

He expresses his pain at their loss and mentions several times, the intensity of feeling and the degree by which he had clung to them, as if they were his lifeline. In their absence, he describes himself as “a tree rent by lightning”.²¹¹ All the tragedies they had experienced together bonded them and made them closer, just as much as the happier moments. Lionel's feelings mirror those of Mary, where the pain she endured was rendered bearable with the clinging affection she felt towards Percy.

In spite of his condition as the last man Lionel perseveres. During his aimless wanderings he stumbles upon a cottage, hope is ambiguous in the scene he describes, he indulges in the delusion that he might find an inhabitant.

An array as for a meal might almost have *deceived* me into the dear belief that I had here found what I had so long sought [...] I steeled myself against the *delusion* [...] I fancied that I was proof against the *expectation* yet my heart beat audibly²¹²

He discovers very quickly that this place, like the rest of the world, is abandoned “In truth it was a death feast! [...] these were objects each and all betokening the fallaciousness of my expectations.”²¹³ Against his better judgement he cannot help but indulge in these feeble hopes “I had hoped in the very heart of despair [...]”²¹⁴ Continuing his journey Lionel visits Forli and lingers on the mental image of the city populated by men, he clings to his memories, the human desire to see others in order to assert his own emotions.²¹⁵ Here, for the first time since he has become the last survivor, he sees himself in a mirror and takes in his wretched appearance. Initially he does not express the intention to compose himself, he finds it useless since no one would ever be able to see him, but coherently

²⁰⁹ Hugh J. Luke, *op. cit.*, 1965, pp. 316–327.

²¹⁰ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, *cit.*, p. 451.

²¹¹ *Ibidem*

²¹² *Idem*, p. 454.

²¹³ *Ibidem*

²¹⁴ *Ibidem*

²¹⁵ Jennifer Deren, “Revolting Sympathies in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 72, No. 2, (2017): pp. 135–60.

with his previous hopes, he decides not to give in to such a macabre thought, and once again he expresses his firm conviction that he *will* find a companion someday. “[Hope] whispered to me, that, in such a plight, I should be an object of fear and aversion to the being, preserved I knew not where, but I fondly trusted, at length, to be found by me”.²¹⁶ Lionel effectively decides to move forward. He lets go of the comfort of mourning and of inhabiting memories instead of the real world in a way Mathilda never could. Hope prevails on the fallacious comfort of memories and urges Lionel to find a principle, a mean to affirm himself and give new meaning to life. To hold onto to it and use it to lift himself up from this state of despair.²¹⁷

Shelley’s novels matured from “Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it.”²¹⁸ to “[...]hope, however vague, was so dear to me.”²¹⁹ The characters, even in the moments of despair, cling to life, but in *The Last Man* she mentions hope in a more direct way. Lionel is *alive*, and he wants to feel that way. Despite everything there is a notable effort to cling to whatever is left amidst all the darkness and desolation. He resolves to continue towards Rome in hopes of finding another survivor, with “something like hope for my companion”.²²⁰ Hope leads him forward; it is both a consolation and a companion. However, he will realise he is completely alone upon his arrival in Rome. As the comprehension of his situation dawns on him he will have to endure alone, by gathering his strength and rationality. The rational awareness that, though he is alone, there is still meaning, and perhaps he will find someone else one day. What he possess at the end is a more rational hope, not the blind hope that guided him to Rome which seems to almost come from outside him, the hope he gains at the end is one of his own creation, volition and strength of mind. *The Last Man* represents the overcoming of a pessimist view point of life, Lionel, initially devastated by Adrian and Clara’s death, manages to find a new meaning. At the end of the novel Lionel quits Rome, his destiny is unknown, and it is not clear what will happen to him.

A novel about the last surviving man on earth is, paradoxically, the most hopeful of Shelley’s first three novels, it contains the most hopeful ending and message. Lionel, unlike Victor and Mathilda does not die, nor does he mention a wish to commit suicide, like the creature. Instead, he expresses his wish to keep on living, to write his story and to find a new meaning in life. This novel is the product of a greater maturity and deeper reflection on Shelley’s part, a maturity she had to acquire over the course of the years and a conclusion she inevitably had to come to. Left alone she realized

²¹⁶ *Idem*, p. 455.

²¹⁷ Robert Lance Snyder, “Apocalypse and Indeterminacy in Mary Shelley’s ‘*The Last Man*.’” *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 17, N. 4, (1978): pp. 435–452.

²¹⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* cit., p. 77.

²¹⁹ Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, cit., p. 456.

²²⁰ *Ibidem*

life still held value and she carried on her own legacy and that of her husband's through her writing. Her writing is the means by which she honours the life she led with her husband and friends. Writing this novel gave her the chance to objectify her grief and overcome the melancholy state her losses had reduced her to.²²¹ The novel is testimony to a life well spent, of well meaning ideals, and of mistakes she can never regret completely.

In the end Lionel decides not to live out his days in Rome, a place which has become a phantom city, because art cannot fill the void left by his loved ones and wasting his life away would be useless. He begins towards a new cause, just like Mary. The thought of her husband, her friends and her children never completely abandoned her, but after a mourning period she chose to see meaning beyond death, to keep writing. Both her and Lionel make the important decision not to dwell senselessly in the past, they realize they cannot live entirely of memories. When Lionel wanders through the phantom city of Rome his initial thought is that of establishing himself there, he marvels at the beauty of the city. The reader can see the similarity between Lionel wandering the deserted streets of Rome and gazing at the ruins and Shelley lost dwelling in her own thoughts clinging to her ghosts. Clinging to the places and people they placed their hopes in is the natural response to loss, the attempt to cling to life as it was before. Nevertheless, Shelley quits her museum of regrets and takes the decision which is compatible with life. Like her, Lionel will quit Rome and set off in pursuit of something more, something more alive, because ruins and ghosts are deceitful companions, holding people back. Lionel resolves on pursuing a new meaning in his life, he leaves what he once thought to be his salvation plan behind and quits Rome. Life, however scary it might seem to navigate through it alone, is where the living belong. Shelley said she felt like the last relic of a race, but it is through choosing to keep on living that she will honour and carry the legacy of her companions. The love people give does not die with them and by continuing to live, she can carry it and share it with others. By redacting new copies of her husband's poetry, by raising their son. Honouring the dead is noble, but succumbing to a macabre existence is wrong, and Shelley does not follow this path. She does not succumb to a *religio mortis*, one that demands that the past be brought forward and interfere with the present.

In her first novels hope seems deceitful, always leading to inevitable suffering. In all her novels there is a moment, before catastrophe hits, when the characters believe they may yet be safe. Victor, as he marries Elizabeth, is almost convinced he might escape the creature's vengeance, only for Elizabeth to be murdered that same night, Mathilda thought being reunited with her father would

²²¹ Robert Lance Snyder, *op. cit.*, pp. 435–452.

be the beginning of her eternal happiness, but she is devastated by his love confession and subsequent suicide. Lionel was resolved to live out his days in Rome with his companions but once he arrives in the eternal city he is alone. Shelley's novels all contain the theme of the failure of hope, nevertheless the endings always make up for it in one way or another. Her characters are always peaceful and accepting of their fate in the end. Furthermore, they are never well defined endings. In *Frankenstein* we do not know exactly what will happen to the creature, his intention to commit suicide is hinted at, but we cannot be sure he actually went through with it. When Mathilda is done recounting her story we do not know exactly what happens, even though we know she is convinced she is dying. Both Victor and Mathilda are telling their life in retrospective and reflecting on their lives they find them to have been shaped by happiness just as much as tragedy. In their acceptance of their fate and death they overcome their state of self-commiseration. The feelings traditionally attributed to the sublime are not expressed in Shelley upon seeing an outside catastrophe but in the realization and acceptance of the character's own tragedy. It is both a critique of Romantic aesthetic discourse and a contribution to it, it reimagines the aesthetic experience, critiquing the limitations of Burke's sublime without disregarding its potentiality.²²² This overcoming of pain is well delineated in *The Last Man*, it is both the epitome and overcoming of her romantic disillusionment.

²²² Jennifer Jones, "The Art of Redundancy: Sublime Fiction and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*." *The Keats-Shelley Review* Vol. 29, N.1 (2015): 25-41.

Coda: Hope Regained

“It is a serious thing just to be alive on this fresh morning
in this broken world”- Mary Oliver²²³

The one thread that connects all of the characters in Shelley’s novels is hope, at the very end it is hope that endures, a hope that is personal and unique to each character, reflected in the life they have led.²²⁴ Mathilda’s is that of being reunited with her father and her wish for Woodville to be happy²²⁵. For Victor it is the hope that another man may succeed where he has failed, for the creature it is that its pain will finally come to an end. Victor’s hopes may not be the most noble but they are his hopes nonetheless and the author respects his wishes. The creature is hopeful, until the very end, that he will manage to establish an understanding with his creator. He is doomed to suffer the unrequited love of a creator whom he has been, in spite of his better judgment, always loyal to. It is there that lays the creature’s most human trait. In spite of Victor’s flaws and neglect, his love never leaves him, and all of his horrifying actions, are to him an attempt to establish contact with his creator.²²⁶ Behind all the creature’s actions was not the intent to destroy Victor, but to make him sympathize with his situation, make him understand and suffer as he does. It is not the correct path the creature chooses but it is the only one he is capable of. No matter how cruel Victor is towards the creature he will not abandon him, it is a transcendent love, and the hope the creature holds on to. Victor, Walton and the creature all persevere, in their dreams, and their human need for compassion.²²⁷ After the creature witnesses the corpse of Victor he also launches himself into a poetical discourse on his death, similar in style and emphasis to that of Mathilda.

But soon [...] I shall die, and what I now feel be no longer felt. Soon these burning miseries will be extinct. I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be sept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it thinks, it will surely not think thus.²²⁸

²²³ Mary Oliver, Invitation, in *Devotions*, Penguin books, New York, 2017, p. 107.

²²⁴ Hartley S. Spatt, “Mary Shelley’s last men: the Thruth of Dreams.”, *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 7, N. 4, (1975): pp. 526–537.

²²⁵ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, cit., p. 110.

²²⁶ Joyce Carol Oates, *op. cit.*, pp.543-554.

²²⁷ Hartley S. Spatt. *op. cit.*, pp.526-537.

²²⁸ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* cit., p. 191.

The creature is also complacent at the thought of his own death, he says he will ascend *triumphantly* and lingers on the details of his death; he has given thought to his death and wants it to be carried out in a certain way, just like Mathilda arranged hers in great detail. He is triumphant and happy at the thought of dying and finally being at peace. Both *Frankenstein* and *Matilda* have very allusive endings, Mathilda and the creature talk about their death but we do not read of the actual moment, they both take exit by expressing the hope they place in their deaths, describing it as a happily awaited fate. Lionel's hope is the most ambitious and the only one that requires an active effort, he is the only character out of the three who does not die. Being alive, however, does not automatically mean taking pleasure in life. Lionel pushes himself to truly seize his life and find a new meaning. Shelley matured through writing of isolation and death as an end to all suffering and something pacific to thinking that life, with all its sorrows, is worth living, and Lionel and herself should not decay and rot with the ghosts of the past but move forward.

All of Shelley's characters tell their story to someone. Victor and Mathilda's retelling are flawed and slightly corrupted, oriented towards self-assertion, but they are still important. It still represents the need to share their experience and feel heard, witnessed in their despair. They are very emotional, the reader can easily empathize with them and understand their point of view. Lionel, unlike Victor and Mathilda, does not talk to someone within the book, he talks to a nonspecific person, he does not know who will read his story, or if someone will ever read it for that matter, for all he knows there is no posterity.²²⁹ These three characters wish to share their stories with someone. Despite all the tragedies, the most basic human desires for comprehension and compassion are not lost to Shelley's characters. Their humanity is in the narration of their story, in their wish to be heard by someone. Shelley never finds herself descending into mere nihilism, hope and humanity, empathy and compassion always emerge in her stories, stronger than the sorrows she recounts.

Love! What had I to love? Oh many things: there was the moonshine, and the bright stars; the breezes and the refreshing rains; there was the whole earth and the sky that covers it²³⁰

In spite of all their loneliness and sorrows they hold on to their humanity, even when hope weavers they cannot be anything but human. Shelley can never doom them to a bleak and empty existence, they still have their empathy, and the need to share with their few select companions. Their selective sociability is moulded after Shelley's own²³¹. Even Mathilda, who runs to the woods to seek complete

²²⁹ Betty T. Bennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-225.

²³⁰ Mary Shelley, *Mathilda*, *cit.*, p. 71.

²³¹ Claire Sheridan *op. cit.*, pp. 415-435.

solitude, finds a new companion in Woodville, and it is to him she writes to and confides in. Mathilda can only tolerate a select few. After her retirement to the woods, when she finds herself wishing for someone's company again she says "I wished for *one* heart"²³² more than one would be unbearable to her. Throughout all the novel she is only ever entwined emotionally with one person at a time. Victor also has few companions, Lionel too, it is a common trait to all her characters because they share it with their author.²³³ Lionel doomed to his condition as the last man, is forced to write his story and leave it for posterity, with no one particular person in mind and the uncertainty of whether someone will ever read it. Mary felt alone at that time of her life, and she had to learn to negotiate her needs. She must have realized she could not live in complete solitude, so she had to open up, Lionel's story is her own, more than any of her previous character's. She is telling her story through Lionel and she is telling it to the reader, with her companions gone she turns to writing for solace and sympathy, after having mourned and realized she cannot only keep ghosts as company she exercise her will to power, like Lionel, and finds a new purpose in life. They do not fossilize in the past. With his companions gone Lionel decides to write his story anyway, with the hope that someone will read it, Mary decides not to be defeated by life and finds solace in her writings, in the new friendships she will form and her the knowledge that she still has a son.

Shelley's works manifest the ever changing sentiments that seized her during her life, her struggles with idealisms, society, the changing way in which she regarded romanticism, her parents, her own friends and her husband. There is an element of disillusionment contained in her romanticism, hope is illusory, fleeting and dooms man to an unhappy destiny, but there is also the almost desperate desire to see good in life, to see beyond the wreckage left by hope, to love the wrecked and flawed self that has emerged from the ruins. The desire to abandon oneself to fate, to accept that events were destined to unfold the way they did, that nothing was ever truly up to us. The desperate need to rid ourselves of guilt and consequently of remorse. Most of the character villanize nature in an attempt to rid themselves of their guilt, but then comes the inevitable knowledge that they are projecting their desires and needs onto things that have no emotions, or faults. Making them the bearers of their lack. In the contrasting and mutating nature of her opinions she does nothing more than show her deepest humanity, beautifully flawed, but humane precisely because of this.

The beauty of Shelley's writing is that, despite everything, she does not succumb to an elegy of commiseration; it is hauntingly beautiful and melancholy in the most humane way. She does not write of suffering for suffering's sake, but to show that something survived it. It is common in the field of arts, to glorify suffering and sadness and the tormented artist, to view pain as the enabler of

²³²*Idem*, p.74.

²³³ Claire Sheridan, *op. cit.*, pp. 415-435.

the artist. When we think of suffering as a sentiment, which alone resides in the artist, we forget to see all those things that went into enduring their sorrows, all that is more than just pain. A tormented artist's work is seen as beautiful because it comes from their pain, but there is more than just pain. There is a certain degree of sadness that comes with being alive, but it can never be the whole purpose of existence. Shelley's way of coping with grief was literature: have her novels as a result of her sorrows, but it is mostly because, through it all, she had something to live for: hope. Her novels are not a form of self-commiseration, but a way to feel *witnessed* in her pain, human tenderness, connections, nature, people, the little things that are not so little. Hope shaped Shelley's life and she poured her heart out in her novels, they are her testimony, that even through all the suffering life is worth living.

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Riassunto:

Questa tesi è uno studio sulla tematica della speranza nei lavori di Mary Shelley, di come la sua visione sugli ideali convenzionali tipici del romanticismo siano cambiate e maturate attraverso la sua vita a causa delle sue esperienze personali. Il primo capitolo è dedicato ad un'inquadratura generale di Shelley nel movimento letterario dell'epoca ed alle sue relazioni interpersonali con i suoi famigliari e con altri membri del movimento, specialmente con suo marito, Percy Shelley. Le sue relazioni interpersonali sono state spesso segnate da elementi di disfunzionalità che trovano la loro rielaborazione nei suoi lavori.

Il primo capitolo presenta una riflessione sui temi degli scrittori romantici e le ideologie proprie del movimento, temi che talvolta li accomunano, ma oggetto di questa riflessione sono soprattutto gli elementi che li contraddistinguono e le visioni proprie e personali di ognuno di essi. La posizione di Shelley all'interno del movimento è particolarmente interessante in quanto si fece strada in un campo predominato principalmente da scrittori uomini e diventò una delle maggiori scrittrici del periodo, nonché la più longeva della sua cerchia di compagni.

La vita di Shelley è stata una vita avventurosa ma segnata da gravi tragedie. Le figure della madre, la scrittrice Mary Wollstonecraft, e del padre, il filosofo William Godwin, segnarono profondamente la sua inclinazione letteraria fin dall'infanzia. La madre morì tragicamente poco dopo la nascita di Shelley ma il padre le garantì un'educazione ampia nei campi umanistici quali arte, letteratura, filosofia e politica. Incontrò a soli 16 anni il poeta romantico Percy Shelley, allora già sposato con un'altra donna, ma che sarebbe diventato il suo futuro marito, e con egli stabilì subito una relazione sentimentale.

La loro vita insieme, seppur breve, fu segnata equamente da intense emozioni e tragedie. La loro prima figlia morì poco dopo la nascita e questa fu solo una delle numerose perdite che attesero Shelley negli anni a seguire. Di tutti i suoi figli, infatti, solo uno, Percy Florence, visse fino ad età adulta. Percy Shelley fu sempre oggetto dell'ammirazione di sua moglie ma le convenzioni romantiche tipiche delle sue opere e del romanticismo trovano in Mary Shelley una versione spesso critica e meno idealista.

Il secondo capitolo si focalizza sulla tecnica narrativa nei romanzi di Shelley. La vita di Shelley percorre i romanzi sottotraccia, l'io autobiografico talvolta coincide con l'io poetico. I suoi personaggi sono riflesso degli ideali di Shelley in periodi diversi della sua vita e carriera letteraria ed enunciano di conseguenza certi aspetti del suo pensiero. Sono riflesso della sua vita, delle sue

esperienze e relazioni affettive ed amicali, ma nelle loro storie vengono anche celate le ansie ed inquietudini del vissuto di Shelley. Contrariamente ad altri poeti romantici, sembra essere più cosciente dei pericoli e delle tragedie che un estremo senso di superiorità intellettuale possono portare. Oggetto principale dei suoi romanzi è perciò l'attenzione emotiva che Shelley investe nei suoi personaggi. Shelley è la narratrice empatica per eccellenza del periodo romantico. Tutti i suoi personaggi sono sensibili, perseguitati da traumi, a volte causati da loro stessi, a volte da eventi di cui non hanno colpe. Ciò che hanno in comune è il loro attaccamento alla speranza ed alla loro umanità. La speranza iniziale non coincide sempre con la speranza enunciata nel finale dei romanzi, i personaggi vengono sottoposti ad una serie di eventi traumatici e maturano di conseguenza fino a riporre le loro speranze in ideali diversi. Inizialmente si affidano ad una cieca speranza in qualcosa per poi sprofondare in assoluta e travolgente tragedia. La grande creazione di Victor diventa il suo peggiore incubo, le speranze di una vita felice con il padre amato si trasformano in un amore contorto per Mathilda, la speranza di una vita con i suoi compagni a Roma rende più amara per Lionel la realizzazione di essere diventato l'ultimo uomo.

Una caratteristica cardine dei romanzi di Shelley è l'ambiguità morale e la narrazione non sempre attendibile dei personaggi. L'attendibilità delle loro narrazioni viene meno a causa della loro forte emotività, emotività a cui Shelley decide di dare spazio sopra alla coerenza degli eventi. Victor è il personaggio che più rappresenta questa ambiguità morale, eppure Shelley non lo condanna mai apertamente ma lascia spazio alla sua narrazione. Non interferisce all'interno del romanzo per impartire una lezione morale ai lettori ma lascia che sia egli stesso a narrare le sue vicende ed invita i lettori a prendere coscienza degli eventi, ad essere comprensivi nei suoi confronti, ma di arrivare alle proprie conclusioni riguardo al suo comportamento. Sebbene Victor sia un personaggio che passa facilmente da vittima a carnefice Shelley non lo condanna mai, né lo rilega soltanto ad una delle due sfere. Per quanto discutibili possano sembrare i suoi pensieri e le sue azioni Shelley rimane fedele alla sua posizione di narratrice empatica e non pretende di insinuarsi all'interno del racconto.

Il terzo capitolo è dedicato alle tematiche delle speranze spezzate nei romanzi di Shelley. La speranza iniziale dei personaggi, di fatti, viene sempre spezzata da un'irrimediabile e inattesa catastrofe. Dopo aver abbandonato la sua creatura Victor immagina, per poco, di poter tornare alla sua vecchia stabilità familiare. Questa speranza gli viene immediatamente tolta nel momento in cui la creatura uccide la sua amata Elizabeth. Da allora Victor si dedicherà soltanto alla ricerca di vendetta nei confronti della creatura, ricerca che lo condurrà sulla nave del capitano Walton.

Mathilda, una volta riunita al padre, crede di poter vivere finalmente una vita felice lontano dalla

solitudine che aveva conosciuto in infanzia. Anche questa speranza viene immediatamente spezzata nel momento in cui il padre le rivela il terribile segreto dell'amore incestuoso che ha coltivato nei suoi confronti. Successivamente a questa confessione il padre aggrava la situazione di Mathilda togliendosi la vita. Questo segreto, e il suicidio del padre, la condanneranno ad una solitudine auto-imposta, in quanto nel suo stato di emotività Mathilda non riesce a riconciliare una vita funzionale, insieme ai suoi parenti e ad altre persone. Si sentirà invece a suo agio soltanto in una casa nel mezzo di una foresta, in compagnia del fantasma del padre e dei suoi ricordi. Seppur convinta di essere destinata ad una vita solitaria, in questa foresta incontra un giovane uomo, Woodville, un poeta che si fa portavoce dell'ottimismo e dell'immaginazione tipica del romanticismo e del pensiero di Percy Shelley. Woodville tenta di persuadere Mathilda ad abbandonare la sua miseria e la solitudine ma sottovaluta la determinatezza con cui Mathilda si rilega costantemente al ruolo di vittima sofferente.

The Last Man rappresenta non solo la caduta dello storico impero ottomano ma di tutti gli imperi umani, diventa quindi rappresentante anche del fallimento del movimento romantico. Nell'ultimo uomo Shelley racconta attraverso la metafora della peste la malattia degli ideali infallibili romantici e delle tragedie personali della sua vita. Ogni personaggio all'interno del romanzo trova il suo corrispettivo reale in un conoscente di Shelley. Lord Raymond è il corrispettivo di Lord Byron, e come lui si spinge in battaglia per seguire i suoi ideali eroici e vi trova la morte. Adrian trova il suo corrispettivo nel marito Percy Shelley ed il protagonista, Lionel, è l'immagine della stessa autrice. A seguito delle molte sofferenze subite nel corso della sua vita e della morte di molte persone a lei care gli ideali romantici si fanno sempre più inquietanti. La peste stermina la maggior parte della popolazione finché Lionel e pochi altri superstiti non decidono di recarsi a Roma, la città eterna, per ristabilire una società. Ma la città che troverà Lionel non sarà la città eterna che immaginava, ma una città fantasma. La speranza di una nuova vita viene spezzata con l'inaspettata morte dei pochi compagni sopravvissuti, rendendo Lionel l'ultimo uomo.

Tuttavia, *The Last Man* rappresenta anche, per certe misure, il superamento della disillusione romantica di Shelley. Lionel mette in atto la sua forza emotiva in maniera differente da Victor e Mathilda. Al termine dei due romanzi precedenti i personaggi ripongono speranza nella propria morte come fine delle loro sofferenze. Lionel è l'unico personaggio a non contemplare la propria morte. Lionel lascia Roma, la città che una volta pensava potesse essere la salvezza dell'umanità e ora è diventata una città fantasma poco confortante, in quanto, al contrario di Mathilda, nei fantasmi e ricordi dei suoi compagni non trova l'empatia e la comprensione, il rapporto umano di cui ha bisogno. Si rende conto che l'arte ed i ricordi non possono colmare l'assenza dei suoi cari e

presentargli una vita soddisfacente. Decide, invece, di riporre le sue speranze nella credenza che un giorno troverà un altro superstite e scrive la sua storia per i posteri.

La conclusione tratta quindi della speranza e l'umanità che legano le opere di Shelley. Per quanto vengano sottoposti ad eventi miserabili non condanna mai i suoi personaggi ad una vita completamente disumana. Shelley non ricade mai nel puro pessimismo. Tutti i suoi personaggi cercano in qualche modo il contatto umano e raccontano le proprie vicende a qualcuno. Victor confida in Walton, Mathilda in Woodville e Lionel in un lettore non ben definito nel quale decide di riporre le sue speranze. Anche avendo subito terribili agonie questi personaggi ricorrono comunque all'empatia che può essere trovata soltanto in un altro uomo.