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The Body; or, A Contemporary Prometheus: a Posthumanist Reading of Mary Shelley's and Hanif Kureishi's Works

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INTRODUCTION

Even though the title of my thesis already gives away the main topics and themes that I have decided to connect and analyse in this work, I understand that it may appear intricate and possibly obscure for those who are not familiar with the texts that I have taken into consideration, or the approach I have adopted. For this reason, in the next few pages I am going to elucidate the ambiguous term "posthumanist" and the reasons why I believe this concept can be appropriate to provide a reading of the two texts whose titles have been dismembered, altered and re-assembled – all terms that seem particularly fitting to describe the works I have considered – to create the main title of my thesis; these texts, both of which I am particularly fond of, are Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* and Hanif Kureishi's 2002 novella *The Body*.

The idea of developing my thesis around these two texts stemmed primarily from my interest for Hanif Kureishi's literary production. It can be argued that most people are not familiar with this author's name, because even though his first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia*, published in 1990, made him gain reasonable popularity, the rest of his works have received moderate attention, and have been for the most part investigated within the field of post-colonial studies. Personally, I have been following Kureishi for the last few years and I have come to appreciate the honest, sometimes brutal approach he takes towards the account of everyday life's tales. In particular, I find that the irony and sense of humour that are tightly intertwined in his stories work particularly well as to break the tension and drama that characterizes the lives of his (usually male) protagonists. Since his debut on the British literary scene, Kureishi has been exploring the lives of ordinary men who are faced with the insecurities, anxieties and struggles that their often-banal and pretty much always unsatisfactory lives force them to go through. However, even though the protagonist of *The Body* aptly fits this description, the text that I have decided to take into account for the development of my thesis stands out as an odd element in the list of novels, short-stories, play scripts and screenplays Kureishi has produced so far because of its peculiar nature: when I first approached *The Body*, I was immediately surprised to be faced with a novella that employs science fiction as the literary premise that propels the action. In fact, Kureishi has accustomed his readers with a realistic style, and even though experiments with the genres of the grotesque and magic-realism can be identified within his previous production, the fact of introducing an avant-garde biotechnological experiment at the core of his story can be considered a unique example among his works.

However, even though this novella can hardly be taken as a representative of his wide production, the style that characterizes Kureishi's writing is clearly recognizable within this text as well: not only does the author make extensive use of the aforementioned irony and sense of humour as to break the tension of some pivotal scenes, but the fact that he interposes the action with a wide range of foul language and lewd remarks that characterize his works – and that, in my view, have the purpose of both shocking and amusing his readers, as well as adding some colour to the characters' speech – undeniably marks this peculiar novella as a Kureishian text; and even though this was his first experiment with science fiction, I personally consider it a very well accomplished first attempt in a genre that until then had been alien to him – but that, to the present day, has not been followed by any other try.

As I have anticipated, what I want to propose in the next chapters is the comparison of Kureishi's novella with one of the most famous texts in the British (but I would move so far as to say, in the world-wide) literary canon; a novel that, since it was published in 1818, has opened the way to a profusion of adaptations, re-writings and re-readings of its text under a number of different perspectives, proving to be able to endure the passing of time without losing any of its attractiveness and relevance. The text I am referring to is Mary Shelley's first and most famous novel, *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus*. I am aware that the idea of comparing two texts written almost two centuries apart from one another may seem quite odd, but what I would like to propose is that the two works (that are, in fact, quite different in terms of narrative style and, of course, characters' lifestyles) can be argued to share a consistent number of literary features, as well as themes; and, as I am going to show later on, it can be argued that the social reasons that moved both authors to write their texts are quite similar. For these reasons, what I want to propose in my thesis is that in 2002 Hanif Kureishi offered his readers a 21st century re-writing of Mary Shelley's most famous novel, with the purpose of making use of literature as to address the fields of science and technology and advance both a warning for his readers and a critique to those scientific experiments that thoughtlessly seem to be going too far; in fact, this was exactly what Mary Shelley aimed to do at the beginning of the 19th century when she published her *Frankenstein*.

In addition to this, the theoretical framework that I have decided to adopt when analysing and comparing the two texts is the one that has been developed around the discourse on the "posthuman". Indeed, it is not a case that the science fiction genre is generally taken into consideration when a posthumanist approach is adopted to explore

literary texts: science fiction works have the power to create fictional settings that provide readers with alternative realities to the one they live in and make them reflect upon them. Of course, it may be argued that the fantasy genre uses this same premise too; however, fantasy stories generally deal with supernatural and magical elements to carry out the plot, and these features give fantasy authors the utmost freedom when imagining fictional scenarios for their characters, without putting their imagination under any kind of restraint. On the other hand, the genre of science fiction deals instead with scenarios and technologies that are either already existing, or that readers can perceive could actually be developed in a more-or-less near future, because the stories they tell are always based on technological premises that stem from scientific advancement. And even though it is true that some science fiction premises might still seem quite implausible in the current era (and, among these, it is possible to place Kureishi's full-body transplant too), all the technologies they employ are still located within the realm of scientific theory and necessarily force the readers to meditate on the consequences of the technological change that the current age is characterized by. In this respect, science fiction can be considered a supplement to science, because the literary genre embraces scientific development, but it also reminds its readers that science has consequences that need to be dealt with and, envisioning abstract scenarios and concepts, it forces its readers to consider the legal, ethical and socio-economic implications of scientific endeavours that are often not explored by science. It can be argued that one of the reasons why the genre has gained increasing popularity in the last few decades is because science and technology are something that people who live in first-world countries in the twenty-first century are becoming increasingly familiar with and accepting towards, and this is exactly one of the aspects that the "posthuman" discourse aims to analyse: in recognizing that people's lives are increasingly characterized by the presence of technological items, posthumanist thinkers have been asking themselves – among other things – in what ways machines, science and technologies are affecting contemporary lives, and they question whether scientific and technological advancements should be allowed to move forward in a steady impetus of continual advancement towards knowledge, or whether limits should be imposed to this trend. In an age when free information circulates on the web and virtually everybody can access it thanks to increasingly advanced and inexpensive portable devices, when social networks have developed new means of interaction between individuals and are changing the ways in which people conceive relation, and when progresses in the field of medicine make it possible for human bodies to be controlled, fixed and modified in

case of necessity (or even at will), posthumanism examines how the increasingly intricate relationships between biological bodies and technoscience are bringing about the necessity for a radical revaluation of human subjectivity, exploring the many ways in which technological innovations have changed (and keep doing so) the understanding of concepts like "normal", "natural" and even what it means to be human in the modern era. In fact, nowadays most people who live in developed countries cannot imagine their lives as stripped of the aid provided by technological items, but they often overlook the fact that these are constantly changing the way they interact with the environment they live in, with the people they share that environment with and, no less importantly, the way they perceive themselves. This is exactly the point of departure of the posthumanist thinking, that proposes theoretical and analytical tools in order to understand and explain the impact of technology and science on the human subject.

At this point, it might be argued that using an approach that has been developed in the last few decades and that focuses on the changes occurring in the contemporary era might not seem appropriate to analyse a literary text like *Frankenstein*, that was written at the beginning of the 19th century. However, as I will argue in the second and, more in detail, in the fourth chapter of this thesis, Mary Shelley's first and most famous novel is still relevant in contemporary discussions about science and technology as it was the first literary text written in an age when huge advances and innovations in the fields of science and technology were raising conflicting feelings towards these issues. In those circumstances, Shelley wrote her fictional narrative with the specific purpose of addressing these questions and advocating for a rational and sensible use of the new opportunities offered by those emerging fields of knowledge: stemming from the realm of science-fiction (and being, in fact, the first literary text ever written that can be legitimately labelled as such), her novel had the power of making readers reflect upon the dramatic changes that were occurring in real life because of science-fact. Indeed, it can be argued that one of the many reasons why Mary Shelley's text has well survived to the present day is because the kind of issues that one can clearly read in her novel are still at stake in the second decade of the 21st century. Nowadays, with the advancements of reproductive technologies, cloning, artificial intelligence, robotics and other scientific advancements that are often accused to be threatening the natural state of things, the name of Frankenstein (that, as a matter of fact, is most often erroneously attributed to the "monster" rather than to his creator) still often resonates as a threatening reminder – or anticipation – of what can happen when science oversteps its bounds, and two centuries

after its publication the novel can still give contemporary readers pause for thought. With the purpose of connecting the themes I have mentioned so far, I have decided to organise the development of my thesis in the following way:

In the first chapter, I have proposed a broad introduction to the cultural and philosophical discourses that have been developed in the last few decades and that have been collected under the umbrella term of "posthuman". However, I think it is necessary to point out that what I have proposed cannot be taken as a thorough and complete investigation on the matter for at least two reasons: firstly, since this is a fairly recent discourse that started being developed in the late 20th century and that to the present day has not been examined in its entirety, I have tried to highlight the major issues and concerns that have been discussed so far in the field, but I have done so while being fully aware that it would take a much more elaborate work to provide an extensive and detailed account of the state-of-the-art on the matter. Secondly, on the same grounds it can be argued that, at the moment, there are a number of scholars working in different fields who are trying to provide their own, personal contribution towards the definition and analysis of what constitutes the posthuman state, tackling the issue from different points of view and with different approaches. As a consequence of this, a number of various (sometimes competing, or at least not perfectly-overlapping) models of posthumanism are currently in existence and, apparently, it is not even possible to identify a single, unambiguous definition for the term "posthuman" yet, as to embrace all the multiple facets of the issue. For these reasons, it is necessary for me to state that, even though different possible definitions of what "posthuman" and "posthumanism" (as a philosophical approach) represent today, the ones I refer to in this thesis are based primarily on the concepts developed by Donna Haraway and Katherine Hayles. In particular, the works published by Haraway in the 1980s and '90s aimed to dismantle the dualistic and anthropocentric vision that for many centuries the Western tradition had considered valid in order to analyse, categorize and interpret the world. Haraway proposed a rejection and reconfiguration of the values traditionally connected with the humanist subject, because she wanted to demonstrate how static or fixed theories of what it means to be human have harmed historically precarious subjects (women, non-white, queer and disabled people among others) by framing them as less-than-human. On her part, Hayles focused on the necessity to bring the question of embodiment back into the discourse of posthumanism: according to her, this was something that had been overlooked in early discussions on the posthuman, that focused more on the possibility of disentangling human consciousness

from the burden of the physical body and the possibility of transferring the former into a machine. Instead, Hayles strongly supported the view that the body one inhabits is a crucial element in the shaping of one's identity and thoughts and, as a consequence of this, since the publication of her works embodiment has been posited as a central tenet in contemporary posthumanism, which endorses the idea that human consciousness is tied to the human body and cannot exist apart from it. In their works, both Haraway and Hayles emphasise the disintegration of the liberal humanist subject as the core characteristic of posthumanism: for a long time, not only had that been assumed to be a rational, autonomous and unified being, but it tended to be identified as a European, white, able-bodied, and heterosexual male subject. Of course, it can be argued that this was quite a limited vision of humanity, but for a long time that was accepted as a standard of reference, contributing to the devaluation of all those subjects who did not fall within that frame. Nowadays, this limited vision can no longer be supported and, as the "post" prefix indicates, it seems appropriate to move beyond the static and fixed representation of humanity that had been provided by humanism. However, even though this is a central tenet in all the theories developed around the "posthuman", I am aware of the fact that taking the works of Haraway and Hayles as the main reference for the development of my thesis implies that the interpretation of the two literary texts that I have proposed cannot necessarily be the only valid one, and alternative interpretations based on the works of other posthumanist thinkers would be plausible as well.

However, what I argue in my reading is that in both texts the creation of a post-human character is carried out as a reaction to feelings of fear and anxiety connected with human corporeality: ageing, physical decay and death are features congenital to all human beings, but both Victor Frankenstein and Adam (the protagonist of Kureishi's novella) are unwilling to accept this fact, and they both resort to the means offered by science and technology to try and dominate natural life processes. As a consequence of this, both stories seem to be particularly suitable to be interpreted in a posthumanist light, because they both put at the centre of their narratives two subjects whose "birth" defies the natural process of sexual reproduction and whose bodies, created from the assemblage of different pieces, host two subjects who cannot be either defined as completely human or not human at all, and necessarily need to be labelled as posthuman. And if at first the two human protagonists apparently succeed in their objectives, cheating nature and gaining control over death and ageing, they are soon bound to learn that meddling with nature without considering in advance the possible negative outcomes of one's actions is a high

risk and this does not, ultimately, provide them with the originally desired result. In addition, it can be argued that both texts help carry out the discourse on the posthuman in its two main aspects: on the one hand, developing fantasies of post-human embodiment that fit the "transhumanist" ambition of a future in which technoscience will allow human bodies to be augmented and enhanced, creating a better version of humanity in which issues such as physical fatigue, illness and even biological death will no longer be a problem; on the other hand, they both help investigating posthumanism as a philosophical discourse that aims to move away from traditional notions of identity and embodiment. These are the main reasons why I have considered it appropriate to employ these two science fiction texts as a way to explore the posthuman discourse in literature.

The second chapter of my thesis is devoted to the analysis of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In particular, in my reading of this literature classic I have decided to highlight and debunk a series of common, wrong assumptions regarding this novel and its author. In fact, not only did the fame of her first work overshadow any other text written by Shelley (so much so that today she is commonly considered a single-book author), but over the course of the last two centuries both the plot and the characters of her most famous novel have been deeply reworked and rehashed multiple times, as to adapt them to the increasing influence of different entertainment industries; in particular, it can be argued that theatre first and, in later years, even more so the film industry have appropriated Shelley's work and, in order to make it more appealing for their audiences, have deeply altered and distorted her original idea, creating a parallel version of the story that hardly matches the novel but that has gained extraordinary fame and widespread acceptance in popular culture, with the result that, even though most people have never actually read the novel, they erroneously believe they know the story and the characters of *Frankenstein,* because they have become acquainted with them by way of the novel's numerous cinematic adaptations. In spite of this, in its two centuries of life, Mary Shelley's novel has attracted the attention of a wide number of literary scholars, who have advanced numerous readings of the novel under the light of different cultural movements. Especially in the late decades of the twentieth century, with the rise of feminism, post-colonial, queer, and disability studies, the novel has been analysed and reappraised with the purpose of recovering and empowering the figure of the "monster", that for way too long a time was considered to have been abused and mistreated. In fact, even though popular narrations connected with the story tend to depict the evil monster as the cause of his innocent creator's problems, Shelley's novel tells a whole different story. For this

reason, the fictional figure of Frankenstein's creature (this, a much more neutral term, which also carries in its etymology the idea of creation, and therefore that of a newborn who needs to be looked after during the first stages of its life) was taken as an example of the outcast social minorities whose voices had been constantly silenced throughout history, leaving them out from public engagement, and whose lives had been therefore valued as less worthy to be lived. In fact, this imposed social silence, along with the continual rejection that the creature is subjected to throughout the novel, is what ignites the creature's frustration and anger and what sparks his conversion into a murderous monster; Mary Shelley's ethical message was that once the unfamiliar is forcibly described as monstrous and denied a voice, bringing about and perpetrating injustice, racism, sexism, and prejudice, one literally creates the evil.

In the third chapter of my thesis I have developed my reading of Hanif Kureishi's *The Body*. It can be argued that the feelings of being rejected by society and being cast in a state of otherness – that, as I have just highlighted, characterize the creature's story in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* – are something that Hanif Kureishi himself experienced early on in his life: being the son a Pakistani immigrant who married an English woman, Kureishi grew up in the still-predominantly-white society of the 1950s and '60s Britain. Back then, the country was undergoing a massive social revolution, that would later on bring about a whole redefinition of the values that constitute "Britishness" and, consequently, of those who can legitimately call themselves British. However, at the time not everyone was willing to accept this dramatic social change, and young Hanif experienced on his skin the racial discrimination that would later become one of the major themes of his first works. In fact, unlike Frankenstein's creature, Kureishi actually managed to find a way out of his imposed social silence: determined to find his legitimate place in the world, he used art as his means of expression, and the power of his words allowed him to finally make his voice heard, and liberated him from the burden of otherness. As I have anticipated, in 2002 the writer proposed for the first time a science-fiction story in which the protagonist, a British writer in his mid-sixties, undergoes a full-body transplant and has his brain transferred in the corpse of a handsome young man in his mid-twenties. In particular, the themes I have focused upon in my reading of *The Body* are the social reasons that propel the protagonist to willingly accept such a drastic turn in the events of his life. The novella is set in a society dominated by a youth-centred vision which is strongly supported by the consumeristic urges of the mass media industry, and that is easy to identify as a typical Western society of the beginning of the 21st century, in

which the increasing trend of depicting youth (which, as a social category, is the main target of advertising campaigns) as the ideal stage of life, and the only one worth to be lived, has deep effects on the psyche of those who receive that message, and brings to the internalization of negative attitudes about ageing and old age, undermining the confidence of older adults in their dealings with the physical and social world, and leading them to entertain lower expectations of themselves as agents. In fact, this is the reason why Adam, the protagonist of Kureishi's novella, seems at first to be blessed by the rejuvenating process offered by the cutting-edge procedure, but both the fact that his new life necessarily requires inhabiting the body of a dead "donor", and the fact that he is prone to discard his own body expecting that there will be no consequences, make him a negative character who is bound to get punished: the experiment he willingly accepts to take part in brings about the idea of a future society in which bodies will be considered as mere vehicles that can be discarded and replaced when no longer useful, and this also implies that new bodies will need to be made constantly available, eliminating the subject who inhabits that body to make room for a new one. Kureishi advances a dystopic vision of a future in which the wealthy and powerful will be able to keep on living to the detriment of the 'dregs of society', who will be exploited in new, inhumane ways. Moreover, the writer describes how Adam and the other body-buyers assume that their brain is the only repository of their identity, while their decaying physical bodies are not involved in the definition of personal identity. Instead, as the protagonist eventually comes to understand, the body's role is not simply that of a brain's receptacle, but it is a person's interface with the outer world, which necessarily shapes that person's view on the world surrounding him/her and, at the same time, determines how the world sees and evaluates that subject. In fact, this is the central proposition that I have taken into consideration in the analysis of both novels: the two creatures' life experiences are fundamentally determined by the peculiar bodies they 'wear' and that (both in Kureishi's contemporary 21st century society, as well as in the 19th century one in which Shelley's creature lives) are the first thing that people who meet them use to interpret how they are in terms of personality. On the one hand, Adam manages to escape from the apathetic life that he feels his old body had condemned him to, and after the surgery his new body becomes the enabling tool that rekindles the zest for life he had long set aside (before he realizes that he has willingly condemned himself to live in a foreign body and witness his old life as an external spectator). On the other hand, Frankenstein's creature's life is doomed to be spent in a state of imposed loneliness that cannot give him any hope for the

future: no matter how much he tries to prove his humanity through kind and benevolent deeds, it is only the "blind" readers who perceive that he is a good-natured and sympathetic being. All those who judge him using their eyes cannot overcome the terrifying and repulsive feelings that his monstrous body generates in them and assume that his outer aspect mirrors his personality. However, as distinct from Adam, the creature never asked to be brought to life, he never had the chance to choose his body, and he is repeatedly denied the only things he ever asked for: love and affection, especially on the part of the man who gave him life before remorselessly abandoning him.

Finally, in the fourth chapter of my thesis I have compared the two texts, highlighting a number of literary features that helped me to support my hypothesis that, when venturing into the genre of science fiction for the first time, Hanif Kureishi drew inspiration from the novel which is commonly assumed to be science fiction's foundational text, with the purpose of paying homage to Mary Shelley and providing a 21st century version of her *Frankenstein*: in both text, the science fiction premise is the pretext that helps sparking the visionary gaze of the writers, who use literary fiction in order to speculate on the possible social consequences of what they see is happening around them, especially in terms of the scientific and technological innovations that are being developed around the time they write their works. Putting at the centre of their narrations two non-human characters that are also the narrators of their own stories, both authors question the stability of the concept of "human", pushing their readers to consider whether the technologically-mediated lives of their not-fully-human characters should be granted the same kind of dignity and respect as any other human subject. This is the same kind of philosophical question that lies at the heart of posthumanism, that tries to de-privilege the traditional hierarchical status of the humanist subject: indeed, even though posthumanism does not mean to reject the Western humanist traditions of the past, it proposes a re-conceptualization of identity and social relations that seems to be more appropriate to describe the lives and modes of relations of the (post-)humans who live in the 21st century. With this in mind, what both Shelley's prescient novel and Kureishi's (not too) futuristic novella seem to demand is an ethical development of science and technology that will not create further hierarchies and new subaltern classes among individuals but, in a hopeful and positive view of the future, will work towards the realization of better life conditions for "every-body".

CHAPTER 1 – THE POSTHUMAN BODY

1.1 - BODIES AND TECHNOLOGY: FROM IMPAIRMENT CORRECTION TO BODY ENHANCEMENT

> I am always looking for provocative titles that can help carry the theme of an exhibition beyond the insider art world and into the wider culture. During one of my morning runs, I came up with "Post Human". It has been very interesting to see the term enter into language.
>
> Jeffrey Deitch[1]

The relationship between bodies and technology is a much-debated and contested issue, a contemporary and on-going discourse that has served to "draw attention both to the limits of human body boundaries, and to the extension of the human body".[2] The scientific and technological discoveries of the last few decades have been altering the traditional concept of how physical boundaries are perceived, since genetics, cybernetics and surgery are constantly manipulating the body, altering its perception and calling into question its traditional biological principles.

> This period of redefining the human condition as distinct from other entities is not limited to any specific technology. It encompasses biotechnologies, but also includes such innovations as artificial intelligence, life extension and genetic or nanotechological engineering. Yet, the symbiosis of the organic and machinic takes place in its most extreme form through the merging of humans with medical technology, allowing the transplantation of limbs, and the reconstructing of life, which utilises technology and biology.[3]

In the same way, technologies have been affecting the way people relate with the environment they live in, as well as how they conceive relationships with other fellow humans. In the light of these evolutions, artists and scholars working in different fields have then started questioning traditional concepts, like the relationship between embodiment and identity and, to a greater extent, they have begun to work towards a redefinition of what it means to be "human" in the contemporary age. The quote at the beginning of this chapter was drawn from an interview with Jeffrey Deitch, the curator of the renowned 1992 exhibition "Post Human" in which, for the first time, artists working

[1] "Exhibition Histories: Jeffrey Deitch on 'Post Human' in 1992/93". Available from: https://www.spikeartmagazine.com/en/articles/exhibition-histories-0 [Last accessed on March 1, 2020]

[2] M. Fraser, M. Greco (2005), "Introduction". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.), *The Body: A Reader,* London: Routledge, pp. 1-42, p. 5.

[3] A. Miah (2008), "A Critical History of Posthumanism". In B. Gordijn, R. Chadwick (eds.), *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity,* Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 71-94, p. 88.

in different fields tried to express through their works the cultural mutations that they perceived were occurring in the changing society that surrounded them: contemporary artists were the first to give thought to the radical alterations humans are undergoing, claiming an increasing blurring of the boundaries traditionally separating the "natural" and the "artificial" and envisioning a future in which clear-cut distinctions between them would not be easy to identify. The reason why I have decided to use Deitch's words to tackle this question at the beginning of my thesis – instead of starting by quoting the many researchers who, in different fields, have been addressing the relationship between humans, science and machines – is because I think that an artist's point of view can be more relatable and easier to access in order to get a broad overview on the questions that I am going to deal with in the next few chapters. Deitch's arguments are then meant to be considered as an introduction to the many theories developed around the "posthuman":

> When I presented "Post Human", almost 25 years ago, I began the catalog essay by asking if we might be the last generation of real humans. Would the inevitable fusion of bioengineering, high-tech bodybuilding, plastic surgery, and artificial intelligence create the next stage of evolution while we watched?[4]

Of course, in tracing the history of human evolution, it is impossible to ignore the relationship between human bodies and the use of more-or-less technological instruments: since the beginning of their existence, men (and Katherine Hayles noticed that the gender encoding implicit in "man" - rather than "human" - is reflected in the emphasis on tool usage as a traditional defining characteristic of male humans, rather than altruism or nurturing, that commonly encode the female[5]) started making use of whatever they could find in nature, be that simple wood branches, rocks or leaves, turning these into objects that could ease their everyday life and help them cope with the threats of the wild world surrounding them. Obviously, "the claim that man's unique nature was solely defined by tool use could not be sustained, because other animals were shown to use them too".[6] At this stage of human evolution, the idea of technology is far from how it is intended today; however, even though the first rough, mechanical tools were simply objects that could be picked up in case of necessity and put down at will, something foreign to the body and apart from it, they were starting to change the way humans perceived and experienced the

[4] "Exhibition Histories: Jeffrey Deitch on 'Post Human' in 1992/93", cit..
[5] N. K. Hayles (1999), *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 298.
[6] *Idem*, p. 34.

world around them. Anthropologists claim that, little by little, humans started using these rudimentary tools as "detachable extensions of the forelimbs",[7] gradually turning those foreign objects into something that may be defined as "prostheses" of their own biological bodies. Hayles also claims that the speed of this transition seems to have improved dramatically when humans switched from the position of "tool-users" to that of "tool-makers", actively shaping and crafting their tools and making them essential parts of their lives.[8]

Nowadays, scholars of the posthuman are said to be engaged in a broad project that aims "to continue the Enlightenment ideal of aspiring to bring about progress through the employment of technology (as knowledge)". [9] In fact, according to them, posthumanism (and even more so its branch of transhumanism, that will be further analysed in the next few pages) has its roots in the Enlightenment, an age that put "emphasis on notions such as rationality, progress and optimism":[10] in the 18th and 19th centuries, belief in human progress through the development of human knowledge, and especially the sciences, started to spread throughout Europe; the application of science and technology to the human body was strongly supported by the Enlightenment thought, in which reason and scientific knowledge were promoted and that viewed the development of science and medicine as a way to correct (but also improve) the natural bodily functions: the idea that "humans themselves [could] be developed through the application of science"[11] started to gain a foothold in that period and, especially with the purpose of "extending human life span by means of medical science",[12] this interference with the natural life cycle through medical intervention was not only accepted, but also encouraged, because the deeply-rooted faith in the use of science aimed "to achieve mastery over nature in order to improve the living condition of human beings".[13]

In the 19th century, along with the scientific innovations that characterized the Industrial Revolution, that gave rise to an increased faith in technologies and marked an

[7] K. P. Oakley (1949), *Man the Tool-Maker,* London: Trustees of the British Museum, p. 1. Quoted in N. K. Hayles (1999), *How We Became Posthuman,* cit., p. 34.
[8] N. K. Hayles (1999), *How We Became Posthuman,* cit., p. 34.
[9] A. Miah (2008), "A Critical History of Posthumanism", cit., p. 95.
[10] F. Ferrando (2013), "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations". *Existenz, An International Journal in Philosophy, Religion, Politics and the Arts*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Fall 2013, pp. 26-32, p. 27.
[11] N. Bostrom (2011), "A History of Transhumanist Thought". In M. Rectenwald, L. Carl (eds.), *Academic Writing Across the Disciplines*, New York: Pearson Longman, pp. 1-30, p. 3.
[12] *Ibidem*.
[13] *Idem*, p. 2.

improvement in life conditions (and a subsequent improvement in humans' life expectancy), the English naturalist Charles Darwin started developing his theories concerning the evolution of life. In his 1859 book *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or, The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* and in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, published in 1871, he explored the concept of human development, giving a great contribution towards the understanding of human life and its evolutions. After the publication of Darwin's theories, "it became increasingly plausible to view the current version of humanity not as the endpoint of evolution but rather as an early phase".[14] Darwin's theory of natural selection was based on the criterion of a species' adaptation to a given environment: according to him, through natural selection it would be possible to reach more fertile and healthier offspring, since those who could not adapt would become extinct. In the light of posthumanist thinking, it has been observed that, since the posthuman's (and specifically the transhuman's) main goal is to "overcome species-based limitations", it can be claimed that this concept is "deeply rooted in the Darwinian understanding of evolutionary biology",[15] although it recognizes the necessity of scientific (and specifically biological and medical) means in order to reach a longer human life expectancy and the chance to have healthier and more fertile new generations: "although Darwin believed that it is speciation and selection that produce species, transhumanists seem to believe that through individual adaptation we may also arrive at the creation of a new species",[16] with the difference that, in this case, humans would have the chance to lead their own biological evolution. Moreover, one of the most radical aspects of Darwin's work was the rejection of the anthropocentric view that characterized his age: "the insistence on a radical division between man and animals received a series of challenges in the 19th and 20th centuries, arising principally from the Darwinian revolution in the biological sciences"[17] and, "because of Darwin's […] theories, we are [now] aware that humans were not created to be masters of all creatures but are themselves animals".[18] As I am going to argue more in detail the next few pages,

[14] *Idem*, p. 3.
[15] F. Bardziński (2014) "Transhumanism and Evolution: Considerations on Darwin, Lamarck and Transhumanism". *Ethics in Progress* Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 103-115, p. 105.
[16] *Idem*, p. 108.
[17] J. D. Bolter (2016) "Posthumanism". In *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*. Available from: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect220 [Last accessed on March 1, 2020]
[18] A. Tarr, D. R. White (2018) "Introduction". In A. Tarr, D. R. White (eds.), *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction: Finding Humanity in a Posthuman World*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, pp. ix-xxiv, p. x.

in recent decades posthumanist thinkers have put this anti-anthropocentric stance at the base of the theories that they have developed around the definition of what constitutes the "posthuman subject".

In fact, the first academic publications that systematically engaged with the idea of the "posthuman subject" and "posthumanism" as a cultural discourse appeared in the late 1990s and early 2000s, even though it is recognized that the term was first used by the Arab American literary theorist Ihab Habib Hassan's in his 1977 essay *Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?.* Hassan expressed the notion as follows:

> At present, posthumanism may appear variously as a dubious neologism, the latest slogan, or simply another image of man's recurrent self-hate. Yet posthumanism may also hint at a potential in our culture, hint at a tendency struggling to become more than a trend. [...] We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself into something that we must helplessly call posthumanism.[19]

This implies that the "posthuman" is a contemporary and on-going debate, a topic which is being developed right now and that is not easy to summarise in a single definition, because the many scholars engaged in this discourse (among them Rosi Braidotti, Elaine L. Graham, Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe and others) have different approaches to the matter and these result in a series of distinct schools of thought that are generally encompassed under the umbrella term of "Posthuman".[20] In general, it is possible to say that they all share the view that the old notion of human does not reflect anymore who we are in the 21st century, because technological improvements and their application in people's lives (and bodies) have reached a level that allows to go beyond what was historically portrayed as human. the idea of expanding the human life span, improving the biological structure of the human body, surpassing its limits and even the idea of reaching eternal life have always been major concerns of science and humanities, but recent discoveries in the fields of genetics, cybernetics and informatics among others, are now turning these science-fiction scenarios into reality. And even though for most people these topics still seem to belong to the realms of fiction and speculation, it is undoubtable that nowadays technology has leaked into practically every aspect of everyday life, considerably changing people's habits and means of relations. This is exactly what Deitch

[19] I. Hassan (1977), "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?". *The Georgia Review,* 31.4, p. 843. Quoted in B. Clarke, M. Rossini (2017), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. xi.

[20] F. Ferrando (2013), "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations", cit., p. 26.

was envisioning when he put together his exhibition at the beginning of the 1990s, gathering artists who worked in different fields that were joined by a common vision: that of an anthropological change about to occur in a close future, when everybody would be able to use technology not only to make their lives easier, but also to actively re-shape their bodies and, as a consequence, their own perception of self.

At this point, I would like to draw from R. L. Rutsky's observation that modern technologies seem to have always been judged according to their utility for human beings, generally attributing them a twofold judgement in terms of "goodness": on the one hand, when they were "viewed as tools, instruments, or prostheses for human use, and thus under human control, they have largely been seen in positive, utopian terms";[21] on the other hand, when technologies have been viewed as not serving human ends, they have generally been interpreted as dystopian, monstrous forces, ready to prevail over humans and creating a vision of a future in which machines would cast them away, enslaving human beings or making them dispensable. Deitch also observed:

> I have been thinking about what will happen when self-driving cars eliminate the need for taxi and truck drivers. Interactive online lectures by entertaining star professors may wipe out the jobs of thousands of teachers. Computer scans connected to big data may provide better medical diagnoses than experienced doctors. Robotic factories might underprice skilled labor, throwing millions of people out of work, even in developing countries. Will governments be able to stop people from cloning their favorite sports and movie stars with stolen DNA? Even the genetically modified and electronically enhanced posthumans may have trouble finding jobs.[22]

Of course, fears of technological change are nothing new: "traditional hand-knitters protested against the mechanical stocking frame as far back as the mid-eighteenth century, and the twentieth century saw automobile workers losing jobs to the machines on the assembly lines".[23] With reference to the issue of "good" and "bad" technologies that I have just brought up, I would like now to address the issue mentioned in the title of this chapter and the different ways in which science and technological advancements can be analysed in reference to their application to the human body. An analysis of the concepts of "impairment" and "enhancement", in reference to the body, requires first and foremost the definition of their traditionally opposed categories: that of the "natural" and "normal".

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[21] R. L. Rutsky (2018), "Technological and Posthuman Zones". Available from: http://criticalposthumanism.net/technological-and-posthuman-zones/ [Last accessed on March 1, 2020]
[22]" Exhibition Histories: Jeffrey Deitch on 'Post Human" in 1992/93', cit..
[23] A. Tarr, D. R. White (2018) "Introduction", cit., p. xi.

These terms could be considered as the starting point from which the concepts of impairment and enhancement are constructed, departing from them in two completely opposed directions.

The concept of "normal" has a double function, both descriptive and evaluative, and these are already evident in the etymological roots of the world: in Latin, *norma* means a T-square, so that "normal" means that which is perpendicular, at right angles. From an extension of this definition, the "normal" comes to be socially defined as what is right and good.[24] In the same way, the Greek-derived *orthogonal* is synonymous with the Latin *normalis*, and it provides the origin for the adjective "orthodox": "[just] like the normal, the orthodox conforms to a set of sanctioned, valued standard", and becomes in turn "the reference for objects or facts which have yet to be in a position to be called such".[25] This leads us to consider as devalued anything that falls outside or differs from the norm, "designating them as modes of being in need of correction".[26] The idea of normality is then connected with the concept of "normalisation", meaning the correction of anything that falls outside the norm.

With concern to bodies, "the development of anatomo-clinical medicine and of physiology – the science of normal vital functions – were particularly important in inaugurating a secular rationality based on the normal/abnormal [...] distinction".[27] and this led to the fact that from the nineteenth century onward, the term "normal" was used to designate the state of organic health. Moreover, this normal/abnormal distinction gradually started replacing the one based on the notions of good and evil, and especially in reference to the good human nature we now say that "it is 'natural' for something to occur when we mean it is 'normal' - that is, regular, typical, and not deviant or pathological".[28] Once again, as a consequence of this, anything that falls outside the norm and cannot reach the standard functions of which are connected to "normality" is automatically labelled as bad and, as I have mentioned earlier, in need of correction. For this reason, both in the medical and in the social discourse, impairment and disability have been defined as deviations and lack of normalcy, and therefore have been relegated to a state of inferiority. Disability is therefore a "socially created" status, one that imposes on the condition of disability "not only the status of a body in need of medical treatment

[24] M. Fraser, M. Greco (2005), "Introduction", cit., p. 17.
[25] *Ibidem*.
[26] *Ibidem*.
[27] *Ibidem*.
[28] *Idem*, p.18.

but the social stigma inflicted on this condition, which is reflected both in the individual's experience and in the social perception of disability".[29] As Peter Freund explains in his *Bodies, Disability and Spaces,*[30] this is immediately apparent in the norms regulating the built environment, which "reflect an assumption of able-bodiness as the norm of reference and, in so doing, simultaneously reinforce it as a superior social value".31 Freund claims that the only possible way to relieve disabled people from the social stigma connected with their condition is to change the way the built environment is thought and planned, and this will lead even "normal" people to change the way they appraise it: an example of this is the fact that the more "architectural features catering for wheelchair users become ubiquitous, the more wheelchair users themselves are able to function 'normally', and indeed cease to be perceived and defined as individuals with 'abnormal' bodies".[32] Therefore, since "characteristics of 'normalcy' give rise to the phenomenon of disability as devalued existence",33 the main goal of technology in the medical field has been that of tackling the disabled and impaired body as to correct the malfunctioning of the organic body and take it back to a state of normal functioning.

Starting from this point, a further analysis has been conducted on the way in which these body-normalizing technologies affect the way the corrected body is perceived as a whole, and to what extent those "foreign objects" have gradually become an integral part of the organic body and, consequently, of the perceived self; for a long time, the question of body boundaries was considered to be a very matter-of fact and visual question: boundaries were assumed to be defined by the epidermal surface of the organic body, and any application of foreign objects onto (or into) the organic body was seen as a mere juxtaposition, since the merging of the two in a single unity was perceived as "unnatural". In fact, this was one of the questions that Katherine Hayles wanted to tackle and reverse in her 1999 book *How We Became Posthuman.* In order to do this, Hayles reports an example provided by the English anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson, who wanted to challenge the assumption that the human body's limits coincided with the skin. According to Hayles, Bateson asked his students a simple question: he wanted to

[29] A. F. Cascais (2013), "The Metamorphic Body in Science Fiction". In K. Allan (ed.), *Disability in Science Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 61-72, pp. 61-62.
[30] P. E. S. Freund (2005), "Bodies, Disability and Spaces: the Social Model and Disabling Spatial Organisations", In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.) (2005). *The Body: A Reader*, cit., pp.182-186.
[31] M. Fraser, M. Greco (2005), "Introduction", cit., p. 18.
[32] *Idem*, pp. 18-19.
[33] M. Fraser, M. Greco (2005), "Normal Bodies (or not)". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.) *The Body: A Reader,* cit., pp. 145-149, p. 147.

know whether an object like a blind man's cane could be considered part of the man:34 "The question aimed to spark a mind-shift. Most of his students thought that human boundaries are naturally defined by epidermal surfaces".[35] Bateson's viewpoint was that cane and man joined "in a single system, for the cane funnels to the man essential information about his environment".36 This conjecture was taken as a starting point by Katherine Hayles too, who provided further examples of everyday situations in which technologies are used to correct biological impairment and fully make experience of one's environment: in order to support her thesis she claims that "the same is true of a hearing aid for a deaf person or a voice synthesizer for someone with impaired speech". However, she definitely moves a step further when she includes in this list "a helmet with a voice-activated firing control for a fighter pilot".[37] Her list, then, is meant to be utterly provocative, because she quickly moves from "modifications intended to compensate for deficiencies", to "interventions designed to enhance normal functioning", claiming that "once this splice is passed, establishing conceptual limits to the process becomes difficult".[38] Therefore, both Bateson and Hayles consider technological tools just as means to communicate with and acquire information from the environment surrounding the person using them, as bodily extensions whose function does not permit to mark a boundary line dividing user and tool, that become merged in a single operating unit.

In my view, Hayles' seamless joining together such different interventions of technologies on the human body can be purposefully used to move to the second issue I have determined to analyse in this chapter; namely, the use of technologies not to "fix" the impaired human body and bring it to a stage of normalcy, but to upgrade its functions in the perspective of departing from that normalcy, in order to reach a next stage of human evolution. This is exactly the question at the core of the Transhumanist thinking that, according to Ferrando "problematizes the current understanding of the human [...] through the possibilities inscribed within its possible biological and technological evolutions".[39] The word "transhumanism" appears to have been first used by Aldous Huxley's brother, Julian Huxley, a distinguished biologist. In *Religion Without Revelation*

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[34] Gregory Bateson (1972) *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, New York: Ballantine Books, p. 251. Cited in N. K. Hayles (1999), *How We Became Posthuman,* cit., p. 304.
[35] N. K. Hayles (1999), *How We Became Posthuman,* cit. p. 84.
[36] *Ibidem.*
[37] *Ibidem.*
[38] *Ibidem*.
[39] F. Ferrando (2013), "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations", cit., p. 27.

(1927), he wrote:

> The human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself – not just sporadically, an individual here in one way, an individual there in another way – but in its entirety, as humanity. We need a name for this new belief. Perhaps transhumanism will serve: man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature.[40]

In essence, Transhumanism is born from the intention of transforming current human beings into an improved, better version of the species, enhancing the normal (which in this case is not meant as "better", as in the case of impairments) physical and intellectual capacities of humans through technological and scientific applications. In 1998, an international group of authors crafted the Transhumanist Declaration,[41] whose first two of the eight preambles state that:

> (1) Humanity stands to be profoundly affected by science and technology in the future. We envision the possibility of broadening human potential by overcoming aging, cognitive shortcomings, involuntary suffering, and our confinement to planet Earth.
> (2) We believe that humanity's potential is still mostly unrealized. There are possible scenarios that lead to wonderful and exceedingly worthwhile enhanced human conditions.

Human enhancement is therefore the main focus and goal of the Transhumanist reflection, and it is something that is envisioned to be reached thanks to science and technology. However, it is important to keep in mind that Transhumanism considers science and technology in all of their possible variables: "not only those already existing, but also their emerging and speculative frames (from regenerative medicine to nanotechnology, radical life extension, mind uploading and cryonics, among other fields)",[42] anything that could allow humans to achieve a "more developed" state, transgressing their physical and intellectual limits. In fact, from the point of view of Transhumanism, the current era is still a middle passage in the history of human evolution, in that people cannot claim to be fully posthuman yet, but they are working towards this goal.

This idea that the current version of human evolution is not the final one, but rather an intermediate phase, allows me to go back to Darwin's concept of evolution, in which,

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[40] J. Huxley (1927), *Religion Without Revelation,* London: E. Benn. Quoted in N. Bostrom (2005), "A History of Transhumanist Thought", cit. p. 7.

[41] "Transhumanist Declaration". Available from: http://humanityplus.org/philosophy/transhumanist-declaration/ [Last accessed on March 1, 2020]

[42] F. Ferrando (2013), "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations", cit., p. 27.

as I have stated before, the Transhumanist thinking is rooted. I would like to point out that discussions about the posthuman condition are not necessarily about human enhancement, because, as it was stated at the beginning of this chapter, there is not a single form of posthuman that can be identified as to portray an integral and unified history of the term, even though all the thinking on the concept revolves around the idea that the posthuman state defines an entity that surpasses the physical and intellectual capacities traditionally belonging to humans. In general, it is possible to say that posthumanist theories deal with the same relationship between species and their environment that Darwin used when he formulated his theories, in which "the classification of species and the survival of the fittest hypothesis reduced the complexity of life to neat and tidy relationships".[43]

> Recently, [...] a new philosophical approach, posthumanism, [began] asserting that being human is not a fixed state but one always dynamic and evolving. Restrictive boundaries are no longer in play, and we do not define who we are by delineating what we are not (animal, machine, monster). [...] Instead, posthumanism looks at the ways our bodies, intelligence, and behavior connect and interact with the environment, technology, and other species.[44]

In fact, a central proposition in the posthuman discourse is the acknowledgement of an anti-anthropocentric stance that aims to dismantle the idea that human beings are superior to all the other species they shares the environment with. As Ferrando expressed:

> In the West, the human has been historically posed in a hierarchical scale to the non-human realm. Such a symbolic structure, based on a human exceptionalism well depicted in the Great Chain of Being, has not only sustained the primacy of humans over non-human animals, but it has also (in)formed the human realm itself, with sexist, racist, classist, homophobic, and ethnocentric presumptions. In other words, not every human being has been considered as such: women, African-American descendants, gays and lesbians, differently-abled people, among others, have represented the margins to what would be considered human.[45]

By the end of the 1990s, critical and cultural posthumanism developed into a more philosophically focused enquiry (now referred to as philosophical posthumanism), in a "comprehensive attempt to re-access each field of philosophical investigation through a newly gained awareness of the limits of previous anthropocentric and humanistic

[43] A. Miah (2008), "A Critical History of Posthumanism", cit., p. 88.
[44] A. Tarr, D. R. White (eds.) (2018), *Posthumanism in Young Adult Fiction*, cit., book synopsis.
[45] F. Ferrando (2013), "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms: Differences and Relations", cit., p. 28.

assumptions":[46] in addition to the idea of bringing about a new, broader discourse to reconceptualize the "human", the posthuman came to represent a new attitude against the systematic classification of the species that inhabit and cohabit on Earth, dethroning human beings from the high-standing position they have been located since the onset of the humanist thought. For this reason, posthumanism seems appropriate to investigate the geological time of the anthropocene, because

> as the anthropocene marks the extent of the impact of human activities on a planetary level, the posthuman focuses on de-centering the human from the primary focus of the discourse [and] stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well . In such a framework, the human is not approached as an autonomous agent, but is located within an extensive system of relations.[47]

This idea of de-centralising human beings in this system of relations goes beyond looking only at organic beings, and includes technological items too, like tools, prosthetics and other technological applications and bodily modifications that cooperate to dismantle the concept of human as a purely biological being: within the posthuman discourse, there is not an actual difference between human beings and the other biological species they share the planet with, but also between humans and inanimate items, tools and technologies in terms of their hierarchical position in the world, because they all influence and are influenced by one another in a system of mutual interaction. To conclude this first part, I would like to highlight that since anti-speciesism has become an integral aspect of the posthuman critical approach, the aforementioned "fear of technology" appears to be inconsistent, because the overcoming of humans' primacy does not imply that they will be replaced with other types of primacies, such as the one of the machines. In conclusion, by rejecting the traditional Western humanist ideals, posthumanism suggests a new understanding of the concept of "being human", attributing major importance to the relationship between all the living and non-living entities that co-exist in nature: posthumanist scholars deny the traditional humanist definition of human as "boundaried, exclusive, unique, exceptional, or naturally dominant".[48] Instead, they claim that "Homo sapiens evolved because of interrelationships with other entities, organic and inorganic"[49] and, as I am going to analyse in the next few pages, this de-centralisation of humans

[46] *Idem,* p. 29.
[47] *Idem,* p. 32.
[48] A. Tarr, D. R. White (2018) "Introduction", cit., p. xi.
[49] *Idem*, p. xii.

within the posthuman discourse has propelled a re-evaluation of human bodies, intelligence and behaviour – which are all considered to be interconnected with other species and the environment – in order to bring about a broader conception of how people conceive themselves and others.

1.2 Redefining Identity in a Technology-Imbued Culture

> The posthuman does not necessitate the obsolescence of the human [...] Rather it participates in re-distributions of difference and identity.[50]

The rapidity of technological advancements that first-world countries have witnessed in recent years naturally leads to the idea that continued technological innovations will have even deeper effects on humanity in the next few decades because, as they permeate into people's lives to make them easier, the also seep into their bodies to fix them, or even make them more performative. As I have stated in the previous pages, humans have always used tools to survive and the development of technology in the medical field has simply accelerated and improved the integration of prosthetics onto (and into) biological human bodies: from the ordinary cane to lean on, to the evolution of glasses to improve vision and hearing aid to correct impaired hearing or loss of it, from the hook to replace a missing hand to the development of high-functionality prosthetic limbs. However, the rise of more-or-less technological machines to a state of necessary companions of people's lives has often raised concerns about the idea one can develop of themselves in relation to their bodies, in terms of body-boundaries, and in defining to what extent technology can influence and affect the definition of one's self.

The increasing "intrusion" of technology into many areas of everyday life since the 1990s, and even more so in the new millennium, has also led to an increased scholarly interest in posthumanism in the same period. Of course, being "human" has never been a fixed state: the concept has always been dynamic, and it is not surprising that it is still evolving. In fact, for more than six centuries the Western world has shared a set of values and beliefs that posited the liberal humanist subject – traditionally assumed to be a rational, autonomous, unified (but implicitly also white, male, able-bodied and heterosexual51) being – at the centre of our system of thinking the human. However, in

[50] J. Halberstam, I. Irvingston (eds.) (1995), *Posthuman Bodies,* Bloomington: Indiana University Press. Quoted in A. Miah (2008), "A Critical History of Posthumanism", cit., p. 81.
[51] V. Flanagan (2014), *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: the Posthuman Subject*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 36.

the contemporary age it seems necessary to recognize that this concept of "human" is no longer effective to describe and comprise all the multiple "manifestations of humanity"[52] that can be observed; and since these cannot be easily classified using the traditional categories that have been employed so far, theorists have started to lean on the label of "posthuman" (in which "post-" stands for "after" or "beyond") as a more inclusive designation of the current – or soon-to-be – state of most subjects. The philosophers who have been analysing this new state propose that everyone has "multiple subjectivities that are in a constant state of construction".[53] As Victoria Flanagan summarizes:

> The key issues raised by posthumanism include: the relationship between embodiment and cognition; the independent and unified humanist subject versus the fragmented, destabilised and collective posthuman subject; and the significance of the cyborg, a figure that plays a pivotal role in posthuman ideology because of the way in which it subverts binary distinctions between human/machine and real/artificial.[54]

In fact, the emblematic figure that has surged as a representative of the posthuman condition is the cyborg: in her 1985 *Cyborg Manifesto* (later revised and republished in 1991), feminist scholar Donna Haraway introduced the "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction" that is "simultaneously animal and machine" and "[populates] worlds ambiguously natural and crafted".[55] Haraway's observations stemmed from her own experience of a woman living in the West; according to her, the Western culture has always been characterized by a series of binary oppositions like the "self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man".[56] Haraway claims that this need to label everything that surrounds us, from items to people, is based on the fact that those dualisms are never equally balanced, and they always signal the dominance of one element above the other. According to her, this is because once dualistic categories are created they are always functional to an organization of the opposed elements in a scale on the base of their value, and the passive acknowledgement of these dualisms signals an implicit acceptance of devaluation on one of the parts. In fact, Haraway

[52] A. Tarr, D. R. White (2018), "Introduction", cit., p. x.
[53] *Idem*, p. xv.
[54] V. Flanagan (2014), *op. cit.,* p.15.
[55] D. Haraway (1991), "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century". In D. Haraway (1991), *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge, pp. 149-181, p. 149.
[56] *Idem*, p. 177.

maintains that throughout history those dualisms have all been "systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of colour, nature, workers, animals - in short, domination of all constituted as others, whose task is to mirror the self".[57]

Haraway took the figure of the cyborg, that was born in the Science Fiction world, to represent the contemporary human condition: to her, not only does the cyborg break down clear-cut distinctions between organism and machine, but since it is also a race-less and sex-less "creature in a post-gender world",[58] it legitimises the fusion of parts that are not "naturally" meant to be together. In fact, the cyborg transgresses all the boundaries that are traditionally employed to interpret and categorize the world, because "[the] relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world".[59]

According to Haraway, the idea that humans are the legitimate representatives of the 'natural world' is a cultural construction, in that "[modern] medicine is […] full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that was not generated in the history of sexuality".[60] The fact that nowadays technologies like the bypass, contact lenses and pacemakers are accepted as part of one's body, to the extent that some of them are vitally essential to some people's surviving, implies that "[by] the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs".[61] And if one can easily accept to have their body moulded and supervised by these technologies, making them something that is not exclusively biological anymore, it is no longer possible to support the idea that the human body is the site of the 'natural' opposed to the 'artificial'. Once this opposition is made void, it is possible to follow on by invalidating all the other dualisms that made up the Western culture, because Haraway's 'cyborg myth' is about "potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work".[62] Haraway concludes that:

> Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. This is a dream not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia. It is an imagination

[57] *Ibidem.*
[58] *Idem*, p. 150.
[59] *Idem*, p. 151.
[60] *Idem*, p. 150.
[61] *Ibidem*.
[62] *Idem*, p. 154.

> of a feminist speaking in tongues to strike fear into the circuits of the supersavers of the new right. It means both building and destroying machines, identities, categories, relationships, space stories.[63]

One of the goals associated with posthumanism is precisely "the philosophical exploration of the relationships between human beings and technology in the modern era",[64] and Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* was one of the texts that critical feminist Katherine Hayles, one of the most celebrated cultural posthumanists, took as a reference when she wrote her *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, the text that brought posthumanism to broad international attention. Hayles draws from Haraway's thinking when she asserts that:

> The flip side of the cyborg's violation of boundaries is what Haraway calls its "pleasurably tight coupling" between parts that are not supposed to touch. Mingling erotically charged violations with potent new fusions, the cyborg becomes the stage on which are performed contestations about the body boundaries that have often marked class, ethnic, and cultural differences. Especially when it operates in the realm of the Imaginary rather than through actual physical operations […], cybernetics intimates that body boundaries are up for grabs.[65]

Hayles claims that cyborgs cannot be simply considered a "product of discourse" or a "technological practice", because "manifesting itself as both technological object and discursive formation, it partakes of the power of the imagination as well as of the actuality of technology. Cyborgs actually exist".[66] In her view "About 10 percent of the current U.S. population are estimated to be cyborgs in the technical sense, including people with electronic pacemakers, artificial joints, drug-implant systems, implanted corneal lenses, and artificial skin"[67] and since her book was published in 1999, it is reasonable to assume that today that percentage has increased dramatically. Moreover, "much higher percentage participates in occupations that make them into metaphoric cyborgs, including the computer keyboarder joined in a cybernetic circuit with the screen, the neurosurgeon guided by fiber-optic microscopy during an operation, and the adolescent game player in the local video-game arcade".[68]

Since the publication of Hayles' work, another issue has been brought to the centre

[63] *Idem*, p. 181.
[64] V. Flanagan (2014), *op. cit.*, p. 4.
[65] N. K. Hayles (1999), *How We Became Posthuman,* cit., p. 85.
[66] *Idem*, p. 115.
[67] *Ibidem*.
[68] *Ibidem.*

of discussion in critical posthumanism: that of embodiment. Since Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* had separated the mind from the body and had exalted the former over the latter, early cyberneticists had assumed that the two could be separated. Their assumption stemmed from the fact that,

> Identified with the rational mind, the liberal subject possessed a body but was not usually represented as being a body. Only because the body is not identified with the self is it possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, and ethnicity.[69]

Hayles took cybernetics to contest "[its] belief that such a separation is possible and that someday we will be able to upload a human consciousness into a machine or free it from physicality completely".[70] In fact, Hayles strongly rejects these assumptions, claiming that knowledge and information, in all their forms, are bound to some kind of physical form and, therefore, cannot exist without it. As a consequence of this, Hayles contends that human consciousness must be necessarily bound to the physical body that 'contains' it and, in the same way, "that physical self is embedded in a natural environment, not separate from that environment but part of it".[71] This is why Hayles cannot accept the idea of considering physical bodies just as natural protheses people are provided with at the moment of their birth, and that can therefore be replaced at one's need (or will) without affecting who that subject is or how he/she perceives the world.

An analysis on this topic was carried out also by the French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who exploited the concepts of experience and perception in order to illustrate that "knowledge of one's own body and knowledge of the world can be accessed only *through* the body".[72] What he meant to propose was that there is a mutual influence in the way one experiences their own body and the way that body helps to shape the experience of the world. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty strongly contested the assumption that the body could be considered as a mere object, first and foremost because "I cannot get an outside perspective on my body, for it is the vehicle through which my perspective comes into being".[73] This means that our relationships with external objects, and with our own bodies too, are always partial: it can

[69] *Idem*, pp. 4-5.
[70] A. Tarr, D. R. White (2018), "Introduction", cit., p. xv.
[71] *Ibidem*.
[72] M. Fraser, M. Greco (2005), "What is a Body?". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.), *The Body: A Reader*, cit., pp. 43-46, p. 43.
[73] *Idem*, p. 44.

be argued that the body is an omnipresent object that it is never possible to fully appraise, and that just like one's own body is always presented to that person from the same angle, "external objects too never turn one of their sides to me without hiding the rest",[74] but at least I can decide from which side to observe them. In other words, "I observe external objects with my body, I handle them, examine them, walk round them, but my body itself is a thing, which I do not observe: in order to do so, I should need the use of a second body which itself would not be observable".[75] Therefore, one's body cannot simply be considered a object like any other, because it is rather "the condition through which it is possible to have relations *with* objects, with, that is, the world".[76] And as a consequence of this, an individual's body cannot be considered an entity which is separate from the rest of the world, but it is rather the medium through which one experiences the world, and that world, in turn, contributes in the perception of one's own body:

> If objects may never show me more that one of their facets, this is because I am myself in a certain place from which I seem them and others, which I cannot see. If nevertheless I believe in the existence of their hidden sides and equally in a world which embraces them all and co-exist with them, I do so insofar my body, always present for me, and yet involved with them in so many objective relationships, sustains their co-existence with it and communicates to them all the pulse of its duration. Thus the permanence of one's own body, if only classical psychology has analysed it, might have led it to the body no longer conceived as an object of the world, but as our means of communication with it, to the world no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determinate thought.77

Katherine Hayles took into account Merleau-Ponty's considerations on embodiment when she claimed that posthumanism offers a new way to refigure the body: "As I have repeatedly argued, human being is first of all embodied being, and the complexities of this embodiment mean that human awareness unfolds in ways very different from those of intelligence embodied in cybernetic machines". [78] Even though embodiment is something shared by all human beings, each one experiences it in a different way, because it is a phenomenon strictly connected to each person's specific body and, consequently, to the experiences that that body takes him/her through. Hayles writes that "[e]mbodiment

[74] M. Merleay-Ponty (2005), "The Experience of the Body and Classical Psychology". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.), *The Body: A Reader*, cit., pp. 52-54, p. 52.
[75] *Idem*, p. 53.
[76] M. Fraser, M. Greco (2005), "What is a Body?", cit. p. 44.
[77] M. Merleay-Ponty (2005), "The Experience of the Body and Classical Psychology", cit., p. 54.
[78] N. K. Hayles (1999), *How We Became Posthuman*, cit. p. 284.

is akin to articulation in that it is inherently performative, subject to individual enactments, and therefore always to some extent improvisational"79 as well as "enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture". [80] The fact that embodiment is contextual and necessarily connected with one's experiences within their own body, leads her to conclude that it is not possible to considered people as mere walking machines: she strongly contests and, in a way, shatters the dream of the cyberneticists who worked towards the idea of seamlessly transferring human consciousness into a machine; Hayles claims that there is a part of our selves, that she defines as "incorporated knowledge" that is embodied and that, even though one cannot be aware of it, "has the power to define the boundaries within which conscious thought takes place".81 In short, Hayles final goal is to "put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects"[82] and her posthuman view is that:

> Humans may enter into symbiotic relationships with intelligent machines (already the case, for example, in computer-assisted surgery); they may be displaced by intelligent machines (already in effect, for example, at Japanese and American assembly plants that use robotic arms for labor); but there is a limit to how seamlessly humans can be articulated with intelligent machines, which remain distinctively different from humans in their embodiments.[83]

For her, the posthuman does not mean the end of humanity, instead it offers resources for rethinking the articulation of humans with other life-forms, both biological and artificial, with whom people share the planet. As a consequence of this,

> While it seems inevitable that technoscience will change what it means to be human in the near future, this is not necessarily a cause for despair. It is imperative that we develop an ethically responsible model of embodied posthuman subjectivity which enlarges rather than decreases the range of bodies that matter.[84]

Although I am aware that in this introduction to the thinking on the "posthuman" I might have oversimplified the concepts introduced and developed by many scholars in the last few decades, the purpose of this first part has been to provide a broad overview of the many and complex interconnections that organic bodies and technologies have been going

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[79] *Idem*, p. 197.
[80] *Idem*, p. 196.
[81] *Idem*, p. 205.
[82] *Idem*, p. 5.
[83] *Idem*, p. 284.
[84] V. Sherryl (2007), *Bodies of Tomorrow: Technology, Subjectivity and Science Fiction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, p. 190. Quoted in V. Flanagan (2014), *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction*, cit., p. 191.

through in recent times, and that have been analysed in different ways by many branches of the posthumn, that often overlap and interact in multiple ways. After all, “posthumanist theory [...] is networked and communal, fluid and changeable, always becoming—a mirror image of the posthumanist self”.[85]

To conclude this first part, I would like to quote once again two personalities that have helped me to develop this introduction to the posthuman: the first one is Jeffrey Deitch, who, in his dystopic view of a post-human world where machines might threaten the stability and survival of humans, making them obsolete, states that “artists’ might end up as one of the only secure professions left”.[86] In a different way, Katherine Hayles also uses the figure of the artist in her thinking of the posthuman. However, instead of seeing their profession as an ultimate means of salvation for the humans' usefulness, she acknowledges that “literary texts are not […] merely passive conduits. They actively shape what the technologies mean and what the scientific theories signify in cultural contexts”.[87] Hayles sees art, and literature in particular, as a way to absorb technological innovations (and speculations) within our everyday lives, normalising them and helping us meditate on them. In turn, literature might be able to influence scientific theories too, creating mutual exchanges between such different fields. This is the kind of influence I am going to explore through the literary texts that will be analysed in the next few chapters: although they were written in different periods and in the light of scientific and technologic discoveries that cannot be compared, they both describe an attempt at surpassing the limits of humanity, and the distorted bodies created as a result of those experiments mark the lives of two posthuman subjects who find themselves in the middle a human world, and are bound to the same destiny.

[85] A. Tarr, D. R. White (2018), “Introduction”, cit., p. xvi.
[86] “Exhibition Histories: Jeffrey Deitch on 'Post Human' in 1992/93”, cit..
[87] N. K. Hayles (1999), *How We Became Posthuman*, cit., p. 21.

CHAPTER 2 – A POSTHUMANIST READING OF *FRANKENSTEIN; OR, THE MODERN PROMETHEUS* BY MARY SHELLEY

2.1 - MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SHELLEY: THE MOTHERHOOD ISSUES OF A REBELLIOUS WOMAN

> It is not singular that, as the daughter of two persons of distinguished literary celebrity, I should very early in life have thought of writing.[88]

Since her birth on August 30, 1797, Mary Shelley's life and career would always be shaped and influenced by the social and political ideals of her parents, two personalities of "controversial writings and reputations".[89] Mary's parents were intellectual rebels who strongly believed in their "duty of engagement in public debate on all pertinent moral, social, and political issues as a means of contributing to the general welfare":[90] her father was the radical philosopher William Godwin, whose major work *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) raised criticism of all forms of political authority, earning him "the enmity of the Prime Minister and the praise of Samuel Taylor Coleridge";[91] her mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, a proto-feminist who analysed the question of gender roles and discrimination, defending women's rights in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). In 1783 Wollstonecraft had established a school at Newington Green with "the evident aim of using its income to create a self-sustaining community of women".[92] She wanted to challenge the traditional view that women were 'naturally' weak; instead, she claimed that "society systematically educated and conditioned them to be so".[93] Utterly unconventional for the time, Mary Wollstonecraft was already four months pregnant when she and Godwin married. The two were against the institution of marriage, but agreed to do so in order to give their child social respectability. Unfortunately, their

[88] M. Shelley (1831), "Author's Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition". In M. Shelley (2008), *Frankenstein*, Richmond: Oneworld Classics, pp. 3-8, p. 3.
[89] P. Clemit (2003), "*Frankenstein, Matilda,* and the Legacies of Godwin and Wollstonecraft". In E. Schor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 26-44, p. 27.
[90] *Idem*, p. 28.
[91] L. Piré (2016), "Introduction". In M. Shelley (2016), *Frankenstein*, Milano: Giunti Classics, pp. 5-10, p. 5.
[92] *Ibidem*.
[93] *Ibidem*.

marriage lasted less than a year, because Wollstonecraft died in September 1797 from complications following the birth of her daughter. The story of her life was disclosed to the public when in 1789 Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* In writing this tribute, not only did Godwin "[politicize] Wollstonecraft's arguments in favour of women's rights to equality and self-determination, but also conceptualized her as an agent of revolutionary social change".[94] As Piré noticed, "[it] is not surprising, then, that Mary Shelley's life was very much an embodiment of the self-sufficiency and resourcefulness her mother urged upon women".[95]

Having become his daughter's only caretaker, Godwin also committed to raise little Fanny Imlay, Wollstonecraft's illegitimate daughter, to whom he later gave the name Godwin. He also attempted to adopt many innovative child-care practices: since he strongly believed that education was the key to social change, he "sought to put his enlightened pedagogical theories into practice in raising his children".[96] Mary was educated at home and, although she never received a formal education, she made great use of her father's extensive library. Godwin himself never worried about the effects of books on his intelligent daughter, who, "challenging the traditional roles of women in the nineteenth century, [...] enjoyed both reading and writing stories from an early age".[97] Godwin's library included his own books and Wollstonecraft's, along with "a wealth of literature, history, science, and philosophy in both French and English Enlightenment traditions".[98] At the same time, young Mary had access to the political, philosophical, scientific and literary conversations that Godwin conducted with his visitors: the Godwin household was visited by some of the most interesting and famous men and women of the day, and this "provided Mary Shelley with an unusually wide-ranging education, in which different forms of knowledge, scientific as well as literary, were equally available as intellectual and literary resources".[99]

In 1814 Mary became acquainted with Percy Bysshe Shelley, who was a devoted student of her father, and the two began a relationship. He was still married to his first wife when he and sixteen-year-old Mary fled England together that same year. They

[94] P. Clemit, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
[95] L. Piré, *op. cit.,* p. 5.
[96] P. Clemit, *op. cit*., p. 29.
[97] L. Piré, *op. cit.,* p. 5.
[98] P. Clemit, *op. cit.*, p. 29.
[99] *Ibidem*.

eloped to France accompanied by Jane Clairmont, the daughter of Godwin's second wife, Mary Jane Clairmont. Mary's travel book *History of a Six Weeks' Tour,* published in 1817, recounts the continental tour she took with Shelley in 1814, along with the account of their 1816 summer spent near Geneva.

Mary's elopement with Percy Shelley alienated her from her father, who refused to speak to her for a few years. While traveling around Europe, the couple struggled financially; moreover, in 1815 they faced the loss of their first child, when Mary delivered a baby girl who only lived for a few days. Unfortunately, of the three other children Mary gave birth to in the following years, only one survived to adulthood. In 1822 Mary miscarried during her fifth pregnancy and nearly lost her life, and with the suicides of both Fanny Godwin and Percy's first wife, Harriet Shelley, death became a steady presence in Mary's life. After Harriet's death in 1816, Mary and Percy Shelley could finally get married and on the day of the wedding Mary and her father met for the first time since she had run away.

The couple spent six weeks of the summer of 1816 on Lake Geneva, where they made friends with Lord Byron and his physician, Dr. John Willam Polidori. Mary Shelley herself, in her *Author's Introduction* to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, recalled the events that led to the writing of her "hideous progeny"[100] and explained how "[she], then a young girl, came to think of and to dilate upon so very hideous an idea":[101] since the cold and rainy weather "often confined [them] for days to the house",[102] the four guests of Villa Diodati used to spend their time reading German ghost stories. One evening they agreed to Byron's proposal that each should write a tale of the supernatural. In those days, Mary had been listening to "many and long […] conversations between Byron and Shelley",103 who was fascinated by the most up-to-date scientific theories concerning "the nature of the principle of life".[104] Mary goes further in her account:

> I busied myself to think of a story – a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak of the mysterious fears of our nature, and awaken thrilling horror – one to make the reader dread to look around, to curdle the blood, and quicken the beatings of the heart [...] I thought and pondered – vainly [...] "Have you thought of a story?" I was asked each

[100] M. Shelley (1831), *Author's Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition, cit.,* p. 7.
[101] *Idem*, p. 3.
[102] *Idem*, p. 4.
[103] *Idem*, p. 6.
[104] *Ibidem*.

> morning, and each morning I was forced to reply with a mortifying negative.[105]

Finally, a reverie of waking dream in which she saw a "horrid thing [...] with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes"[106] gave her the beginning of her story. Mary was excited about it, because she knew that "[w]hat terrified me will terrify others; and I need only describe the spectre which had haunted my midnight pillow".[107] The next day she could finally announce that she had thought of a story, which she began that very day with the words "It was on a dreary night of November",108 which would later become the very famous incipit of chapter 5 of the first volume of *Frankenstein*, in which Victor succeeds in bringing his creation to life.

In the following months, Mary turned her ghost story into the novel she is best remembered for: in 1818, *Frankenstein, or; the Modern Prometheus* debuted as a new novel from an anonymous author. However, Mary Shelley dedicated the first edition "To William Godwin, Author of *Political Justice*, *Caleb Williams*, &c.". According to Clermit, the absence of the author's name puzzled the first reviewers of Shelley's work, but this did not prevent the novel from receiving praise by personalities of the calibre of Sir Walter Scott, who, soon after the novel was published,

> declared that Frankenstein was a novel on the same plan as Godwin's *St. Leon: A Tale of the Sixteenth Century* (1799), in which 'the author's principal object […] is less to produce an effect by means of the marvels of the narrations, than to open new trains and channels of thought.' He surmised that the author was Percy Bysshe Shelley, Godwin's son-in-law.[109]

In fact, since Percy wrote the introduction to the 1818 edition of the novel, many assumed that he had written the book, which immediately proved to be a huge success, gaining instant reputation.

In 1818, Mary and Percy Shelley decided to leave England forever and moved to Italy, successively taking up residence in different cities until they finally settled in Pisa, which became their more or less permanent home until 1822. In 1819 Mary finished her second novel, *Mathilda;* this book was never published during Mary Shelley's lifetime, because her father held back the publication "thinking its mixture of fact and fiction to be

[105] *Idem*, p. 5.
[106] *Idem*, p. 7.
[107] *Ibidem*.
[108] *Ibidem*.
[109] P. Clemit, *op. cit*., pp. 26-27.

mischievous".[110] During this period Mary was struggling with depression from the loss of her children: her little daughter Clara had died in Venice, then her son William died in Rome. However, there was soon a new birth in November 1819, that of Percy Florence Shelley, the only child who survived his mother. Shelley began writing her next novel, *Valperga* (originally *The Life and Adventures of Castruccio, Prince of Lucca*), in April 1820, while in Florence, and was still working on it in Pisa that autumn. This novel shows Mary Shelley moving forward to embrace a larger conception of her role as novelist and thinker: "[in] reaching out to assimilate history and political analysis to the acute psychological portraiture of her first novel, she greatly enlarges the arena in which she is willing to engage a public".[111] In this novel, Mary Shelley subscribes herself on the title page as "the Author of *Frankenstein*". According to Curran, Mary "[refuses] to accept the implicit gender limits that barred women from focusing upon public issues in their writing", making herself "an embodiment of a feminist aspiration to equality that boldly reclaims Mary Wollstonecraft's legacy for a new generation".[112]

On 8 July 1822, death once again visited Mary, when Percy Shelley went offshore on a small boat and was drowned when a sudden storm broke. His body was recovered and "his friends burned it on the beach at Viareggio, in a characteristically romantic fashion".[113] Percy's sudden death left Mary in a psychological turmoil, but she soon committed herself to the immortalisation of her husband, devoting herself to writing his biography and publishing a definitive collection of his poems: in 1839, Mary finally supervised the publication of Shelley Poetical Works, with extensive biographical and critical annotations.

Made a widow at age 24, Mary Shelley worked hard to support herself and her son. She wrote several more articles, tales and novels: in 1826 Mary published *The Last Man*, which is considered to be her other remarkable novel; it describes "the extermination of the human race by plague in the twenty-first century and explores the ultimate desolation of the last man left on Earth".114 This has often been interpreted as a reflection of Mary's own feeling of loneliness after Shelley's death. She also published *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck: A Romance* (1830), *Lodore* (1835) and *Falkner* (1837).

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[110] L. Piré, *op. cit.,* p. 6.
[111] S. Curran (2003), "*Valperga*". In E. Schor (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., pp. 103-115, p. 114.
[112] *Ibidem*.
[113] L. Piré, *op. cit.,* p. 7.
[114] *Ibidem*.

Lynch claims that, after 1820, Mary "[forsook] the imaginary horrors of *Frankenstein* in favour of historical materials […] so as to ease her re-entry into the respectable sector of the literary field, from which the extravagance of her debut work […] had exiled her".[115] Moreover, in 1831 the revised edition of *Frankenstein* was published.

In 1844 her son Percy Florence unexpectedly inherited his grandfather's fortune and title. Rich at last, Mary Shelley was able to live a life of some comfort and she stopped writing. She travelled widely through Europe in later years, but in 1848 she began to suffer the first symptoms of the brain tumour that eventually killed her. Mary Shelley died in London on February 1, 1851. After her death, her son Percy and daughter-in-law Jane had Mary Shelley's parents exhumed from St. Pancras Cemetery in London, which had fallen into neglect over time, and had them reinterred beside Mary at the family's tomb in St. Peter's in Bournemouth. A memorial sculpture to Mary and Percy Shelley was commissioned by Percy Florence and installed at nearby Christchurch Priory.

It was roughly a century after her passing that one of her novels, *Mathilda*, was finally published in the 1950s. From the 1970s onwards, thanks to the rise of feminist movements that considered literature as "a manifestation of the dominant cultural ideologies operating invisibly in the society",[116] started a series of re-readings of the texts that constituted the literary canon of the Western countries. Among others, the figures of Mary Shelley and her *Frankenstein* were reappraised and given new interpretations; in particular, Hoeveler observes that feminist scholars who have adapted Foucault's theories,

> have studied literary genres as species of "discourse systems" that control and dominate how women function in a society that prescribes how they appear and behave. Therefore, feminists and critics working in cultural studies have been interested in *Frankenstein* as a particularly potent discourse system, a manifestation of conflicted ideologies, working sometimes in league with its society's repressive attitudes towards women and sometimes arguing against society's negative stereotypes about the proper roles of mothers, daughters, servants, and friends.[117]

The decade of the 1990s saw feminist readings expand to include the insights of post-colonial theory, queer theory, cultural studies, and disability studies. The text of Mary Shelley's first and most famous novel has proved to be so open to new interpretations in

[115] D. Lynch (2003), "Historical novelist". In E. Schor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., pp. 135-150, p. 136.
[116] D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "*Frankenstein,* Feminism, and Literary Theory". In E. Schor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., pp. 45-62, p. 46.
[117] *Idem*, p. 49.

different cultural fields (Fred Botting noted that "Frankenstein is a product of criticism, not a work of literature"[118]) that, after two centuries from its publication, she is still celebrated as "a figure who survived all manner of upheaval, personal, political, and professional, to produce an oeuvre of bracing intelligence and wide cultural sweep".[119]

2.2 - «MAN, HOW IGNORANT ART THOU IN THY PRIDE OF WISDOM!»: AN INTRODUCTION TO *FRANKENSTEIN*

Considered one of the world's most famous horror stories, as well as the very first science fiction novel ever written, *Frankenstein* was first published anonymously in three volumes in 1818, introduced by a preface written by Percy Shelly, without whose incitement, as Mary Shelley later recognised, the novel "would never have taken the form in which it was presented to the world".[120] The cultural impact that *Frankenstein* has had since its publication has been so relevant that, in popular imagination, Mary Shelley's first novel has overshadowed by far all her other publications; so much so that most people erroneously believe "that she is a one-book author".[121] The name of Frankenstein – that by those who have not read the book is often mistakenly associated not to the maker of the creature but to his "monster" – has proved to be so popular that several of its variations are now commonly used in everyday language, especially when people want to cast irony on man-made assembly of miscellaneous parts or criticize scientific endeavours that they consider "against-nature"; for instance, "[the] condemners of genetically modified meats and vegetables now refer to them as *Frankenfoods*" and "the debates concerning the morality of cloning or stem cell engineering constantly invoke the cautionary example of Frankenstein's monster".[122]

However, the majority of people have never actually read Mary Shelley's novel, and their knowledge of this story rests on the popularity of the so-called "Frankenstein myth": if they were asked to briefly summarise the plot, they would probably describe it as the story of "a mad scientist [who] creates a living being out of dead human parts; it

[118] F. Botting (ed.) (1995), *Frankenstein/Mary Shelley,* New York: St. Martin's, p .1. Quoted in D. L. Hoeveler*, op. cit.,* p. 45.
[119] E. Schor (2003) "Introduction". In E. Schor (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., p. i.
[120] M. Shelley (1831), "Author's Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition", cit., p. 7.
[121] D. L. Hoeveler *op. cit.*, p. 45.
[122] A. K. Mellor (2003), "Making a "Monster": an Introduction to *Frankenstein*". In E. Schor (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., pp. 9-25, p. 9.

then becomes incontrollable and wreaks havoc on the community".[123] Grave-robbing, murders and stitches covering the body of a greenish, zombie-like monster who walks with jerky movements and stretched-out arms are the typical mental pictures that come to the average person's mind when they think of *Frankenstein*. And if asked to describe any crucial scene in the plot, they would probably recall an over-excited Victor Frankenstein, standing next to the operating table along with some spectators, witnessing the first motions of the creature and shouting "It's alive!", an exclamation caught between horror and exultation. However, little do they know that the overdramatic atmosphere often connected with the story is, in fact, the result of the many theatrical and cinematic adaptations that followed the instant success of Mary Shelley's novel: its first stage version, *Presumption, or the Fate of Frankenstein*, dates back to 1823, and it was so successful that in the same year William Godwin rearranged the second edition of his daughter's novel in two volumes.

Even those who have actually read the novel usually approach it by way of its cinematic versions or their influence on popular culture, and are generally surprised by the quietness and subdued atmosphere that surrounds the novel in general, and the scene of the creature's animation in particular: "[there] are no lightning bolts, no thunder, no celebratory ejaculation; it occurs silently, to the accompaniment of a sputtering candle and pattering rain",[124] witnessed only by Victor Frankenstein: "It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs" (p. 55).[125]

However, this scene, which is probably the best-known in the whole novel, is not the beginning of the story. In fact, another of its features which is unknown to those who have not read it, since it would be hard to render it on stage or screen, is the structure of the novel: using original technical skills, Mary Shelley adopted a multiple narrative mode, and her story is told from three different points of view, organised in "a series of concentric screens":[126] the first consists of a series of letters written from Russia by the British explorer Robert Walton to his sister Margaret Walton Saville (whose initials

[123] M. Hindle (1990), "Vital Matters: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Romantic Science". *Critical Survey*, volume 2, issue 1, pp. 29-35, p. 29.
[124] E. Schor (2003), "*Frankenstein* and Film". In E. Schor (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., pp. 63-83, p. 63.
[125] This quote, as well as all the following ones from the text of the novel are drawn from: M. Shelley (2001), *Frankenstein*, Milano: Giunti Classics. Page numbers are given in parenthesis.
[126] A. K. Mellor (2003), *Making a "monster": an introduction to Frankenstein*, cit., p. 13.

M.W.S. are those Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin "coveted and gained when she married the widowed Percy Shelley on December 30, 1816"[127]), who lives in England. In his letters, captain Walton describes his dangerous expedition to discover the passage "to those countries, to reach which at present so many months are requisite" (p. 12) and his meeting with Victor Frankenstein. Robert Walton's story of a failed journey of discovery mirrors Frankenstein's narrative of overreaching ambition: the two men both dream of "the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on mankind to the last generation" (p. 12) and Shelley suggests the reader to take Frankenstein's story as a cautionary tale when he invites the explorer to "[l]earn from me, if not by my precepts, at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (p. 51). The second point of view within the novel is Frankenstein's account of how he created a "monster" and then abandoned it on the very night when he brought it to life, and how his creation turned to murder and revenge, killing Frankenstein's little brother (and indirectly also Justine Moritz, who is accused of little William's murder and sentenced to death), his friend Clerval and his newly-wed wife Elizabeth. Finally, the central narrative is the story of the creature itself, who recounts his own adventures: "how he learned to talk, how he educated himself by studying the literary classics and how his attempts to enter human society by means of kind deeds were always repulsed by people horrified at his ugly appearance".[128] Mary Shelley presents several versions of the same tale, but the stories are told from different perspectives; one important effect of this structure is to slow down the narrative, allowing time for "extended meditations by both the creature and Frankenstein on the nature of morality, the responsibilities of God and parents, and the very principle of life itself".[129] Shelley explores in minute detail the "outsized, inhuman Romantic ambitions"[130] shared by Frankenstein and Walton, and analyses their effects on the creature, who is given the chance to narrate his version; in fact, Mary Shelley's most powerful critique occurs when she allows the creature to tell his own story: in contrast to Frankenstein's "melodramatic outbursts, the creature's measured eloquence reflects a Rousseauvian sensibility, tempered by Godwinian logic".[131] What strikes a first-time reader of the novel is that the

[127] *Idem*, p.12.
[128] L. Pirè, *op. cit.,* p. 9.
[129] A. K. Mellor, *op cit.,* p. 14.
[130] *Ibidem*.
[131] P. Clemit (2003), *op. cit.*, p. 33.

usual cinematographic representations of Shelley's creature as an abnormal and degenerate monster generally deny him the possibility of expressing his own point of view. In fact, according to Schor, "[p]erhaps the most extraordinary undocumented theft of the twentieth century is cinema's theft of the creature's eloquent language, forcing him to speak through his body and through his actions".[132] On screen, the creature is generally represented as dumb, inarticulate and stammering, something which does not correspond at all with Shelley's original description: in the novel, the creature strongly desires to create a bond with the humans that he meets and he understands that even though his appearance is actually scary, he might be able to convince them of his good nature persuading them with his words and action. Indeed, he commits to studying the life habits and the language of the De Lacey's family and proves to be a good student when he realizes that his learning improves much faster than that of Safie's. He understands that the language they share works as a tool that identifies them as members of the same a community, and that they use it to communicate "their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds" (p. 112). In an effort to be accepted within that same community, he teaches himself to produce linguistic sounds: "My organs were indeed harsh, but supple; and although my voice was very unlike the soft music of their tones, yet I pronounced such words as I understood with tolerable ease" (p. 115). Of course, this self-education creates a paradox, "which is both logical (because there is no such a thing as a private language) and anthropological (because there is no human being outside of a human community)"[133] but the creature, still unaware of his own origin and identity, hopes that this will be enough to assimilate with the kind humans he has met. Moreover, when he accidentally finds some books, he cherishes them and works hard towards their understanding. He retrieves a copy of *Volney's The Ruins; or, A Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, "a powerful Enlightenment critique of ancient and modern governments as tyrannical and supported by religious fraud [which] gives him insight into the mixed nature of humankind and into systematized social inequality":[134] "Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous, and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle, and at others as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike [...] I heard of the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid

[132] E. Schor (2003), "*Frankenstein* and Film", cit., p. 63.
[133] F. Cimatti (2016), "Frankenstein on Language and Becoming (Post)Human". *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, vol. 7, n. 1 (2016), pp. 10-27, p. 19.
[134] P. Clemit (2003), *op. cit.,* p. 35.

poverty; of rank, descent, and noble blood" (pp. 119-120). Moreover, the books that he finds by chance – *Parallel Lives* by Plutarch, *Paradise Lost* by John Milton, and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Goethe – "complement Volney's historical overview by focusing on issues of individual morality at different stages of Western civilization".[135] In particular, the creature's reading of *Paradise Lost* as "a true history [...] of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures" (p. 129) leads him to read his own's life as a curse that his creator has cast on him, understanding Frankenstein as a tyrannical God who denied him full humanity: "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous" (p. 99). Throughout the book the creature often quotes *Paradise Lost*, because he identifies himself with Adam and his wretched destiny, and this finally propels him to confront his creator to demand him the creation of his female counterpart:

> I swear to you, by the earth which I inhabit, and by you who made me, that with the companion you bestow I will quit the neighbourhood of man, and dwell, as it may chance, in the most savage of places. My evil passions will have fled, for I shall meet with sympathy! my life will flow quietly away, and in my dying moments I shall not curse my maker. (p. 147)

In fact, it is Frankenstein's refusal to create a second creature that eventually condemns him to his promethean fate: although the novel is commonly known with the sole name of the creator, Shelley originally published it with the subtitle *The Modern Prometheus.* The mythological figure of Prometheus does not appear within the novel, but Shelley makes reference to the legends which are traditionally associated with this character; namely, that he made man from clay and, in order to give life to his creation, he stole fire from the Gods and donated it to man, infusing him with knowledge. It goes without saying that Prometheus' actions triggered rage on the part of the Gods, that punished him for his transgression having him chained to a rock and sending an eagle (the symbol of Zeus) to eat his liver day after day, for eternity. In Mary Shelley's novel, Victor Frankenstein is cast as a Promethean figure because, in striving against human limitations, he commits himself to science with the ultimate goal of bringing benefit to mankind, and he eventually manages to do so when he succeeds in fulfilling "the romantic dream of creating life from inert matter".[136] Equally, captain Walton's desire to conquer nature, to arrive where no other man has gone before and to open a passage through the polar ice, "is cognate with

[135] *Ibidem*.
[136] L. Piré (2001), "Introduction", cit., p. 8.

Frankenstein's Promethean attempt to steal the principle of life from nature".[137] Unfortunately, just like Prometheus, Frankenstein also will be punished for his transgression of the natural course of the events, and even though no eagles are involved in Shelley's narration, her Prometheus will be bound to suffering and solitude for the rest of his life too.

Through the work of Victor Frankenstein, a young student of natural philosophy – which, at the time the novel was written, used to be a general designation for the sciences – Mary Shelley mounts "a powerful critique of the early modern scientific revolution",138 questioning the moral implications of a science taken beyond "normal" limits and exploring them with acute awareness of the dangers involved: according to Mellor, in *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley "turns a skeptical eye on the Enlightenment celebration of science and technology and, no less critically, on her husband, the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and their friend, Lord Byron".[139] Indeed, she narrates how it was after hearing Byron and her husband discussing experiments concerning "the principle of life" that she fell into the waking dream that gave her the idea for her horror story. In fact, the very novel that is assumed to have initiated the genre of Science Fiction, is developed around Victor Frankenstein's peculiar experiment, that scholars claim is based directly on the work of three men of science of the 18th century: Humphry Davy, the first President of the Royal Society of Science; Erasmus Darwin, author of *The Botanic Garden, or, Loves of the Plants* (1789, 1791); and Luigi Galvani, "the Italian scientist who attempted to prove that electricity was the life force by reanimating dead frogs with electrical charges".[140] From Erasmus Darwin, who first theorized the process of botanical and biological evolution through sexual selection, Mary Shelley "derived her belief that a good scientist attempts, not to alter the workings of nature, but rather to observe her processes closely in order to understand her".[141] In fact, this is exactly the opposite of what Victor Frankenstein does when he tries to create a "new species" rather than allowing one to evolve randomly through sexual selection, and Mary Shelley strongly criticized his attempt to mingle with nature, later punishing the scientist for his carelessness regarding the moral consequences of his actions. There is no doubt that, in writing her novel, Shelley was influenced by the scientific advancements

[137] A. K. Mellor (2003), "Making a 'monster': an introduction to Frankenstein", cit., p.13.
[138] *Idem*, p. 18.
[139] *Idem*, p. 9.
[140] *Idem*, p. 18.
[141] *Idem*, p. 18.

that were occurring at the beginning of the 19th century and that she must have known of: historical records of the time report that in December 1802, in London, Luigi Galvani's nephew Giovanni Aldini attempted to restore to life a recently hanged criminal named Thomas Forster. Aldini's experiment, widely reported in the British press, is most likely to be "the scientific prototype for Frankenstein's attempt to reanimate a human corpse"[142] using the "spark of being" (p. 55) for "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter" (p. 50). In fact, even though Mary Shelley does not give any direct clue about her inspiration for the novel, in her *Author's Introduction* she claims that "[p]erhaps a corpse would be reanimated – galvanism had given token of such things – perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together and endued with vital warmth".[143] The powerful concept of electrical current was a particularly potent motivator in Romantic awareness, and the exciting possibility of bringing back to life parts of a dead body by means of electricity was definitely a dream that the scientific spirit of the age must have embraced with enthusiasm. Anne K. Mellor's critical biography, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, argues that Shelley criticizes the scientific discoveries and increasing technological advancements that were taking place in her own day, "advocating instead a more humane, sympathetic and nurturing use of science to improve human life":144 through her novels, Shelley "charts how Nature, a specifically feminine power, avenges herself on Victor's benighted – rational, objective, Enlightenment – masculinity".[145] The idea of a nature that fights back, in an attempt to reclaim its legitimate role of life-giver and nurturer, is particularly strong throughout the novel.

In this respect, Mary Shelley's personal experience is deeply rooted in *Frankenstein*, and many critics agree that the strongest themes in the novel are those connected to the experiences of birth and motherhood: only eighteen months before she started writing her horror story, Mary Shelley had given birth for the first time to a baby girl, whose premature death had produced a recurring dream that she recorded in her journal: "Dream that my little baby came to life again – that it had only been cold & that we rubbed it by the fire & it lived – I awake & find no baby".[146] A year later, Mary had

[142] *Ibidem.*
[143] M. Shelley (1831), "Author's Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition", cit., p. 6.
[144] D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "Frankenstein, Feminism, and Literary Theory", cit., p. 57.
[145] *Ibidem*.
[146] P. R. Feldman, D. Scott-Kilvert (eds.) (1987), *The Journals of Mary Shelley*, 1814–44, 2 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, cit p.70. Quoted in A.K. Mellor (2003), "Making a 'monster': an introduction to Frankenstein", cit., p. 10.

given birth to her second child, William. The fact that Mary gives this same name to Victor Frankenstein's younger brother, who is the creature's first innocent victim, may be related to her fear for the survival of her own son, who did, in fact, die when he was just a child. The same year, Mary also conceived her third child, Clara, and she would die in the following years too. It is undoubtable that, in those years, Mary Shelley shared many feelings typical of pregnant women and new mothers, like the fear for the survival of her own children, concern for her role as a parent as well as a strong hope for a healthy and happy life for her progeny. And it is from these concerns that the central theme of Frankenstein is traditionally considered to have been born: Victor Frankenstein is an example of a father whose total failure in taking responsibility for his parental role leads to dramatic consequences in the life of his child, as well as his own. From the very moment he gives life to his creature, "Frankenstein rejects him in disgust, fleeing from his smiling embrace, and completely abandoning him".[147] This is why the novel is said to show deep anxieties about Mary's own role as a mother.

Ellen Moers was one of the first critics to recognize that Frankenstein evolved out of Shelley's own tragic experience "as a young, unwed mother of a baby who would live only a few weeks".148 For Moers, Frankenstein is a "birth myth" that reveals the "revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences"[149] in which Mary Shelley expressed her own guilt not only for having failed to give a healthy son to her husband – in contrast with Percy Shelley's legal wife Harriet, who had given birth just a few months earlier – but also for having caused her own mother's death. The novel's focus on inadequate parenting is therefore a way in which Mary Shelley investigates and expresses her own anxieties, creating Victor Frankenstein as a fictional stand-in for her fears and expectations towards the parenting role she is afraid of, and burdening him with the role of the thoughtless creator and careless parent. In fact, young Frankenstein, over-excited by the scientific breakthrough he is going to accomplish, never bothers to ask himself whether the creature he is about to give life to would wish to be created or what his life will be like once it is born, and even after he manages to carry out his experiment he never once gives thought to what his own responsibilities toward his "child" might be. Instead, Frankenstein tries to justify

[147] A. K. Mellor (2003), "Making a 'monster': an introduction to *Frankenstein*", cit., p. 10.
[148] D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "*Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Literary Theory", cit., p. 46.
[149] E. Moers (1976), *Literary Women*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday. Quoted in D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "*Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Literary Theory", cit., p. 46.

his negligence and selfishness by repeatedly depicting the creature as an innately malignant "devil," "monster," and "fiend", just like a parent who wants to discharge the responsibility for their child's behaviour: he never tries to acknowledge the creature's independent will and needs, and never tries to show him the sympathy the creature begs for, finally casting him as "the loneliest character in the English novel".[150] Only later on Frankenstein partially takes responsibility for his careless behaviour, when he depicts the creature as a projection of his own worst qualities: "I considered the being whom I had cast among mankind and endowed with the will and power to effect purposes of horror, such as the deed which he had now done, nearly in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me" (p. 75), and during his hallucinatory fever he eventually acknowledges his responsibility for the deaths of his dear ones.

The themes of parenthood and childbirth are so crucial in the development of *Frankenstein*, that the novel "has figured more importantly in the development of feminist literary theory than perhaps any other":[151] feminist scholars have analysed the text in terms of "natural as opposed to unnatural modes of production and reproduction",[152] claiming that *Frankenstein* essentially shows what happens when a man tries to procreate without a woman, subverting the laws of biological reproduction: Victor Frankenstein's purpose is precisely "to usurp from nature the female power of biological reproduction, to become a male womb".[153]

Frankenstein's aversion towards natural reproduction is evident not only when he gives life to his creature without resorting to traditional biological means, but also when he brutally destroys the female creature, the "mate" that Victor had promised the creature in return for their exile from humanity. This is another key scene in the text for feminist critics, who claim that the fact that Victor first accepts to construct the body and only on a second thought – when contemplating the realities of sexuality, desire, and reproduction – he decides to rip that body apart, suggests that "the female body is for Victor infinitely more threatening and 'monstrous' than the creature's male body":[154] not only does Frankenstein fear that she might become a potential sexual partner for the creature, giving rise to a new species of monsters capable to overthrow and destroy humanity, but he is

[150] E. Schor (2003) "Introduction", cit. p. I.
[151] D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "*Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Literary Theory", cit., p. 45.
[152] A. K. Mellor (2003), "Making a 'monster': an introduction to *Frankenstein*", cit., p. 10.
[153] *Idem*, p. 18.
[154] D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "*Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Literary Theory", cit., p. 52.

especially afraid that she might develop a will of her own, just like the male creature did:

> she might become ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and delight, for its own sake, in murder and wretchedness. He had sworn to quit the neighbourhood of man, and hide himself in deserts; but she had not; and she, who in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal, might refuse to comply with a compact made before her creation. They might even hate each other; the creature who already lived loathed his own deformity, and might he not conceive a greater abhorrence for it when it came before his eyes in the female form? She also might turn with disgust from him to the superior beauty of man. (p. 165)

In fact, the sexism that feminist readings of the novel highlight is also undeniable when the creature states that, due to the fact that they will be the only two specimen of this new breed, the female creature will have no other choice but to love him: since he is "alone, and miserable; man will not associate with me; but one as deformed and horrible as myself would not deny herself to me. My companion must be of the same species and have the same defects" (p. 144). This shows that the same unconcern for the creature's feeling that Victor Frankenstein had shown when he first attempted his scientific endeavour, is perpetrated by the creature himself when he claims a female as if it was his own right; the same pattern of selfishness and carelessness is carried on without any concern for the female creature's own willingness and right to self-determination.

If in popular culture the figure of Victor Frankenstein persists as the model of the "mad scientist" who explores forbidden matters in his search for knowledge, *Frankenstein* – the novel – is our culture's "most penetrating literary analysis of the psychology of modern "scientific" man, of the dangers inherent in scientific research, and of the horrifying but predictable consequences of an uncontrolled technological exploitation of nature and the female".[155] But Mary Shelley's literary purposes are primarily ethical: she wants her readers to understand that their ways of seeing and interpreting the world, imposing meanings on that which we cannot fully understand, necessarily have moral consequences, and she urges the reader to acknowledge that Frankenstein's creation is not evil in itself, but has been made that way by circumstances. In the next few pages I am going to analyse the process that turns the love-seeking creature to violence and revenge – leading him to kill not only Victor's brother William but also his bride Elizabeth and his best friend Clerval – and, through a series of monstrous action, actually turns him into a monster.

[155] A. K. Mellor (2003), "Making a 'monster': an introduction to *Frankenstein*", cit., p. 9.

2.3 - THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MONSTROUS BODY IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

> Monsters have always defined the limits of community in Western imaginations. The Centaurs and Amazons of ancient Greece established the limits of the centred polls of the Greek male human by their disruption of marriage and boundary pollutions of the warrior with animality and woman. Unseparated twins and hermaphrodites were the confused human material in early modern France who grounded discourse on the natural and supernatural, medical and legal, portents and diseases -- all crucial to establishing modern identity.[156]

So far, I have tried to avoid using the term "monster" to address Victor Frankenstein's creation, using it only when the context necessarily urged me to do so – for instance, in reference to the murders he commits throughout the novel. In fact, as I have claimed in the previous pages, even though the popular narrations connected with the creature are those of an uncontrollable murderer that massacres humans following an alleged instinct intrinsic in his evil nature, first-time readers of Mary Shelley's novel are immediately struck by the fact that the author recounts an utterly different story in her original text, and they are soon drawn to abandon the label of "monster" when describing the creature – this, a much more neutral term, which also carries in its etymology the idea of creation, and therefore that of a newborn who needs to be looked after during the first stages of its life (something that, in fact, does not occur in the novel, and that undeniably marks the creature's existence).

The title of this subchapter can be interpreted in a double way, and I have decided to purposefully exploit its ambiguousness in that it will allow me to analyse the fact that, throughout Mary Shelley's novel, the figure of the "monster" is constructed twice: once in the physical sense, through the scientific experiment carried out by Victor Frankenstein and, even more so, later on in the social sense too, when both his creator and the other human beings he meets during the first stages of his life reject him, confining him to a state of solitary monstrosity.

Victor Frankenstein's original purpose is quite ambiguous from the beginning, in that he both declares that he "began the creation of a human being" (p. 51), as well as stating that he wants to give life to "an animal as complete and wonderful as man" (p. 51). Apparently, he is not sure of the final result he is going to achieve in terms of the nature

[156] D. Haraway (1991), *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,* cit., p. 180.

of his creation, but with the purpose of "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter" (p. 50) he aims towards the perfection that, according to him, identifies human beings. In order to achieve that, Frankenstein collects limbs and organs of humans and animals alike to put together his creature, venturing into "vaults and charnel-houses" (p. 50) where he selects parts of dead bodies that he considers "beautiful", eventually giving his creature long black hair, pearly white teeth and proportionate dimensions. This last feature, however, does not seem to grant the creature entrance in the human realm, because the creator, in order to facilitate his job, decides to create a being that is much bigger than the average human being. Once sewn together, the parts of dead bodies indeed give life to a living being but, surprised by the success of his own experiment, Frankenstein soon realizes that the creature's appearance does not correspond with the society's traditional view of a "normal" human body, and that all the features that he had selected as "perfect" and "beautiful" suddenly appear to him deformed: "now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart" (p. 55). The monster's "unearthly ugliness rendered it almost too horrible for human eyes" (p. 98), and this is the main reason why the newborn creature is denied a chance of human subjectivity by his own father: his physical appearance clashes with the traditional vision of what a human being should look like, and from the very beginning of his life the creature is cast in a non-human state by the person who should have nurtured and taken care of him. In fact, even though he claimed that he "began the creation of a human being" (p. 51) Victor Frankenstein did not expect that "being" to have a mind of its own or develop a personality, and this is what allows him to abandon his creature without showing any kind of remorse.

As I have stated in the previous pages, while describing Victor Frankenstein's endeavours Mary Shelley does not want to criticize scientific advancement *per se,* but the reckless use of science and technology as a way to overthrow the natural course of things, and especially the scientist's carelessness towards the consequences of his actions: Victor is depicted as so dangerously self-absorbed and entitled that he behaves like a god-like figure when he states that "[l]ife and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs" (p. 52). Through his scientific experiments and researches, Frankenstein wants to bend nature to his own will, and he moves so far as to create life out of dead

matter, bringing into the world a new creature employing unnatural reproductive means.

The fact that Victor wants to employ his scientific and technological knowledge in order to "banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death" (p. 38), makes it possible to consider *Frankenstein* as one of the first examples of novels that can be read in a posthumanist light. Of course, the idea of posthumanism was developed almost two centuries after Mary Shelley wrote her novel and the creature cannot be considered a technological product in the modern sense of the term, but the fact that he is a being created artificially by means of science, and that the ultimate technological advancements of his time are used by Victor Frankenstein in order to move beyond the natural boundaries of life, permits the development of a posthumanist reading of *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus.*

However, before moving on to analyse further elements of the novel that make it possible to label it as a posthumanist work, I would like to tackle the second issue that I have mentioned at the beginning of this subchapter; namely, the social construction of the monstrous body. As I have stated in the previous pages, the survival of Frankenstein's creature in film, myth, and literary criticism has opened the way for a profusion of new, constructive readings of Mary Shelley's "monstrous" character. And whether these new readings have concerned post-colonial theory, queer theory, cultural studies or disability studies, they have all had the same goal: that of analysing the creature in terms of an outcast character, one that struggles in order to assert his own right to life, sympathy and affection but that is constructed as – and forced into the role of – a monster by the society that surrounds him.

With concern to post-colonial theory, Edward Said's seminal study, *Orientalism*, aimed to analyse the ways in which Western racial stereotypes depicted and (mis)conceived the "Orient", creating a vision of its inhabitants that was functional to their discrimination and marginalization. This text was a criticism to the presumption of Western superiority, and propelled the development of post-colonial theory, a field which has been used fruitfully to explore the complicated class, race, and gender issues raised by *Frankenstein.* In this field, Frankenstein's creature has been interpreted within the "tradition in which the mixed-race person [is] often represented as an ambivalent creature torn between different cultures and loyalties, an outcast, a misfit, and a biological unnatural".[157] I also find that there is a strong parallel between the creature's entrance in

[157] D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "*Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Literary Theory", cit., p. 55.

the human world and Franz Fanon's first experience as a black man in a white society: in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explains that he first acknowledged – and was made conscious of – the fact of his blackness when he was first subjected to the "white man's eyes". In this sense, Fanon does not refer to an harmless gaze of curiosity, but a judgmental and criticizing one, whose specific goal was to make him feel self-conscious and subject him into a state of social inferiority, remarking his alleged difference on the basis of the colour of his skin:

> "Look, a Negro!" It was an external stimulus that flickered over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.
> "Look, a Negro!" It was true, it amused me.
> "Look, a Negro!" The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.
> "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened!" Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.[158]

Since Fanon was a psychiatrist, the purpose of his work was to demonstrate the damaging effects of colonial racism; in particular, he claimed that colonialism prevented the colonized subjects from developing an independent sense of identity and this had negative effects on their psyche. According to Fanon, black people were stuck in the effort to assimilate with the white culture and, at the same time, negate their own black identity but, since this was practically impossible, they were eventually forced to internalize their alleged inferiority and see themselves as less-than-human. Of course, the sense of alienation that stemmed from this process had profound psychopathological repercussions on those subjects, bringing about mentally disturbed behaviours. In the same way, Frankenstein's creature is exiled from the social environment by means of the horrified gaze and scared remarks with which he is addressed by the humans he meets since the moment of his birth. It is his physical aspect that triggers fear and hatred towards him and confines him to a state of inferiority; Frankenstein himself declares that "His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him and sometimes felt a wish to console him; but when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened and my feeling were altered to those of horror and hatred" (p. 147).

Interestingly, within the field of gender studies, the transgendered writer Susan Stryker has advanced a transgender reading of Frankenstein: in an autobiographical narrative, she compared the creature's narrative within the novel with her own life

[158] F. Fanon (1986), *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto Press, pp. 111-112.

experiences. Stryker recounts the anger she has experienced because of her pain and rejection, and compared it to "the ostracism that Frankenstein's monster felt in its enmity to the human race".[159] She also compared the reconstruction of her new female body to Frankenstein's assembly of the creature's body, "noting that both operations bespeak the conservative attempt to stabilize gender in the service of heterosexism".[160] Hoeveler noticed that it is interesting to observe reference to physical "disfigurement" in a transgendered woman's account of her bodily experience, and that this is a clear link to the disability-studies approaches that have been employed to analyse Shelley's novel. The purpose of disability studies, according to Simi Linton, "is to criticize the constricted, inaccurate, and inhumane concepts of disability that have dominated academic inquiry",[161] and in particular the notion that disability is primarily a medical category. As she explains:

> [T]he medicalization of disability casts human variation as deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy. Society, in agreeing to assign medical meaning to disability, colludes to keep the issue within the purview of the medical establishment, to keep it a personal matter and "treat" the condition and the person with the condition rather than "treating" the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people's lives. [Our goal] is the reinterpretation of disability as a political category and to the social changes that could follow such a shift. [162]

From this definition, it is possible to see how Frankenstein's creature "can easily be interpreted as "disabled" in a society that values external beauty […], conformity, and stable gender and class determinacy".[163] Although Frankenstein's creature instinctively seeks society, he soon understands that he needs to hide from humans in order not to frighten them, and this is a hint that at the beginning of his life he does not have an evil nature at all. In fact, Mary Shelley describes his being cast in a state of "otherness" just like a black man in a predominantly-white society, a homosexual within a hetero-normative one, or a "differently abled in a world of able, hostile, or indifferent

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[159] S. Stryker (1996), "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage". In R. R. Curry, T. L. Allison (eds.), *States of Rage: Emotional Eruption, Violence, and Social Change*, New York: New York University Press, p. 201. Quoted in D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "*Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Literary Theory", cit. p. 58.

[160] D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "Frankenstein, Feminism, and Literary Theory", cit. p. 58.

[161] *Idem*, p. 59.

[162] S. Linton (1998), *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, New York: New York University Press, pp. 2-11. Quoted in D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "*Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Literary Theory", cit., p. 59.

[163] D. L. Hoeveler (2003), "*Frankenstein*, Feminism, and Literary Theory", cit., p. 59.

people".164 The "otherness" of the creature, which is founded in its physical appearance and size, is "yet another manifestation of disability, a permanent physical condition that the subject can never alter"[165] and the hostile responses that the monster experiences both from his creator and from society – those of rejection, fear and hatred – can all be compared to those described by other disabled writers or characters.

In this respect, I have found particularly interesting the reading of Frankenstein provided by Mark Mossman. Currently Associate Professor of English at Western Illinois University, USA, Mossman is a disabled man who used his own life experience to read Shelley's novel, showing how the challenges the creature goes through in the novel and his striving for acceptance do not differ from those a disabled person experiences in contemporary society:

> [W]hen I read Frankenstein for the first time [...] I read myself as the creature, as a body that has no place in the world, a body that, in its long twisting scars and attachable prosthetic limb, has the imprint of technology and modernist science written upon it, and seems, therefore, "unnatural." When I read of the creature being built, made from selected parts of dead bodies, I easily read it as an enactment that mirrored my own development as a person: artificial, "fashioned" limbs and transplanted organs create the creature, the daemon; such things also construct myself.[166]

Mossman claims that when he first approached the text he felt "all of the resentment of the creature, the anger, the isolation, the loneliness. The creature was the ultimate victim of stereotyped oppression, of a disabling construction of 'ugliness'".[167] And just like Franz Fanon had been subjected to the "white man's eyes", Mossman recalls the numerous times in which inquisitive eyes examined his body and made him feel self-conscious and vulnerable, triggering feeling of hatred not only towards those staring at him, but also towards himself: "I knew that making eye contact meant imprisonment, displacement, perhaps even failure. I knew how the process worked: eye contact would equate deep inscription, the aggressive internalization of abnormality and disability".[168] According to him, the reading of *Frankenstein* is particularly effective for those who are familiar with experiences of imposed powerlessness, because they can easily identify with Shelley's

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[164] *Ibidem*.
[165] *Idem*, p. 60.
[166] M. Mossman (2011), "Acts of Becoming: Autobiography, *Frankenstein*, and the Postmodern Body". Available from: http://pmc.iath.virginia.edu/issue.501/11.3mossman.html [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].
[167] *Idem.*
[168] *Idem.*

hated and marginalized creature: “the novel demonstrates the power of cultural inscription, the way an individual comes to subjectivity through a series of aggressive cultural acts”.[169]

In fact, all the characters in the novel – with only two exceptions – believe that the creature's outer appearance is a valid index to his inner nature, assuming that the creature’s gigantic, yellow-skinned body reflects his monstrous and evil personality; indeed “the term 'monster' derives from the Latin term for a 'divine portent or warning' that is, a warning that only works when the brutish, ugly body is understood to signify evil”.[170] As a consequence of this, the old man in the hut, the villagers, Felix, Safie, Agatha, even the innocent William Frankenstein, they all immediately interpret his physical appearance – and therefore is behaviour – as that of a “monster”. In this light, it is significative that the only character in the novel with whom the creature manages to have an unbiased conversation is the old, blind De Lacey. Apparently, Shelley seems to claim that blindness is a necessary element in order to put aside the prejudices connected to the physical appearance of the creature, and the fact that the only disabled human being in the novel is the one who accepts to listen to the creature's story and even proposes to help him is a crucial element: within the novel, the creature is repeatedly frustrated in his efforts to find an unprejudiced listener, but only the blind De Lacey actually accepts to listen to him and recognizes his “humanness”, because “I am blind and cannot judge of your countenance, but there is something in your words which persuades me that you are sincere. I am poor and an exile, but it will afford me true pleasure to be in any way serviceable to a human creature” (p. 134). Genuinely mistaking the creature for a human being, he is moved by his words, feels sympathy for him and for the first time he is the one who makes the creature feel that there is hope for him to be accepted and loved; nonetheless, this experience turns out to be a failure, because the creature's monstrous appearance eventually scares the able-sighted members of the De Lacey family at the time of their return. Later on, captain Walton meets the creature too; at first, because of the fact that he has already listened to Frankenstein's own recollection of the events, he feels anger and revulsion at the sight of the monstrous body, but at the same time – by closing his eyes – he manages to understand the creature’s suffering, and finally acknowledges his remorse for the death of his creator. Moreover, according to Mellor, “Shelley’s reader,

[169] *Idem.*
[170] E. Schor (2003), “*Frankenstein* and Film”, cit., p. 64.

who listens to the creature's voice as recorded in Walton's letters, has a rare opportunity to judge the creature through the ear, not the eye";[171] in fact, the readers of the novel are as blind as the old De Lacey is, and they can actually give the creature a chance of understanding, accepting to listen to his story without any kind of visual prejudice. Indeed, Mossman suggests that "self-narrative is a tool used by the creature to gain self-determinacy. […] Through self-narrative the creature can, to a point, re-make itself, re-fashion and re-invent a new understanding of its self. With it story the creature tries to resist the disabling definition of "monster" and to write itself into rhetorical normalcy".[172] Therefore, the narration of his life would be an effective way for the creature to escape from the confinement of monstrosity and this is precisely what prevents the readers from burdening him with such an oppressive label; however, throughout the novel he is almost never given this chance to tell his story, because no matter how often he attempts to create a bond with them, all the people he meets instantly run from his disfigured body in fear: "I had hardly placed my foot within the door before the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was roused; some fled, some attacked me, until, grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons, I escaped to the open country and fearfully took refuge in a low hovel" (p. 106). It is only the readers who can penetrate in the creature's mind and finally grant him the sympathy he longs for, because through the monster's narrative they are taken "through his first sensory perceptions, through his strivings for language, through his ardent attentions to the De Laceys, through his inchoate desires, through his first self-conscious reflections (literal and figurative), through his interpretations of signs and later books, all the way to the coalescence of his attitudes and opinions".[173] This is the reason why it is normal, for a reader of the novel, to feel pity and understanding towards the creature, who is constantly rejected and despised by those who surround him; and although it is impossible to condone his acts of violence towards innocent people, any reader can easily acknowledge that he is forced into the role of the monster by the circumstances. Percy Bysshe Shelley himself, in a review of *Frankenstein* intended for the Examiner, wrote: "Treat a person ill, and he will become wicked [...] divide him, a social being, from society, and you impose upon him the irresistible obligations – malevolence and selfishness".[174] Shelley

[171] A. K. Mellor (2003), "Making a 'Monster': an Introduction to *Frankenstein*", cit., p. 20.
[172] M. Mossman (2011), "Acts of Becoming: Autobiography, *Frankenstein*, and the Postmodern Body", cit..
[173] E. Schor (2003), "*Frankenstein* and Film", cit., p. 65.
[174] P. B. Shelley (1818), "On 'Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus'". In E.B. Murray (ed.) (1993), *The Prose Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, Oxford University Press, i 283. Quoted in P. Clemit (2003),

seems to embrace the view that the creature's monstrosity is not a product of its creation, but a consequence of its lack of acceptance by other humans, who fail to embrace him.

However, apart from the constant rejection on the part of the society, the first traumatic event that triggers the creature's conversion into a monster takes place the very first night of his life, when he is despised and rejected by his own father and creator. Indeed, it is possible to acknowledge that all the monstrous acts that he performs throughout his life are not meant to hurt humanity in general, but they have the sole and specific purpose of taking revenge on Frankenstein alone, to try and make him understand the kind of evil solitude Victor has condemned him to because of his negligence. The readers can perceive a first hint of this in the scene of his first homicide, that of little William Frankenstein; although the scared child verbally abuses him: "Monster! Ugly wretch! You wish to eat me and tear me to pieces. You are an ogre" (p. 142), this does not trigger the creature's anger or prompts him to attack the kid; in fact, it is only when he finds out that the child is a relative of his careless creator that he resolves to start his diabolic plan of revenge:

> As I fixed my eyes on the child, I saw something glittering on his breast. I took it; it was a portrait of a most lovely woman. In spite of my malignity, it softened and attracted me. For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips; but presently my rage returned; I remembered that I was forever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow and that she whose resemblance I contemplated would, in regarding me, have changed that air of divine benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright. (p. 143)

Mary Shelley tells her readers that the creature's murders are not the consequences of his evil nature but of Frankenstein's rejection and despise: "At birth, the 'creature', like any other living creature, is 'benevolent'. It is ready to love and to be loved, to look at and to be looked at".[175] Instead, shocked by the uncanny appearance of his "child", Victor deprives him of fatherly affection from the beginning of his life; and even though the creature then goes on looking for familiar affection, and he tries to be accepted into the De Lacey family, he is bound to remain alone: it is while he observes and learns from the family that he becomes aware of his own solitude, and eventually he has to resign himself to participate in their lives as an external observer when he realizes that they will never be able to welcome him as they did with Safie. And even when he asks for a female

"*Frankenstein*, *Matilda*, and the legacies of Godwin and Wollstonecraft", cit., p. 35.

[175] F. Cimatti (2016), "Frankenstein on Language and Becoming (Post)Human", cit., p. 16.

companion, someone as deformed as he is and with whom he could identify and manage to begin his own family, he is once again deprived of affection by his creator and condemned to live as a solitary outcast whose life has no bonds and no purpose: “But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses [...] I had never yet seen a being resembling me, or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I?” (p. 121). Even when, at the end of the novel, he manages to carry out the outmost form of revenge against Frankenstein, the death of his “father” leaves him with no recognition of purpose in his life:

> For while I destroyed his hopes, I did not satisfy my own desires. They were forever ardent and graving; still I desired love and fellowship, and I was still spurned. Was there no injustice in this? Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all human kind sinned against me? [...] I, the miserable and abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on. Even now my blood boils at the recollection of this injustice. (p. 220)

From the beginning of his life until the end of the story, the creature strives for social acceptance and sympathy, but no matter how hard he tries to integrate into human society, eventually he is forced to acknowledge that he will never manage to be accepted as an ordinary man. Even though he repeatedly proves to be good and altruistic – more than any other character in the novel – he is forced to recognize his own monstrosity as a consequence of his physical difference from ordinary people:

> I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers — their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions; but how was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. (p. 114)

As I have claimed in the first chapter of this thesis, the construction of one's personality is necessarily bound to two elements: the body one is furnished with – both the “original” one we are given at the moment of birth and its subsequent transformations, additions and subtractions – and, as a consequence of it, the unique embodied experiences that each one develops throughout their lifetime. These are a direct consequence of the physical body, which is necessary to make experience of the world surrounding one, but also of the social interactions that one manages to carry out with other beings. The two elements are necessarily connected, and mutually influence each other. Unfortunately, the monstrous appearance of the creature's body prevents him from creating any kind of significant bond

with others: since his body is made from the combination of miscellaneous parts of lifeless animal and human bodies – and for this reason the final product cannot be defined either as fully human or non-human – he is a unique kind of hybrid being, a new species that is impossible to clearly identify using traditional labels, and that is automatically described as a monster by those who see him and try to categorize him: "Frankenstein is the story of a being who is at once both inside and outside society. It is outside, because no one recognizes it as a human being; it is inside because it confusedly feels that it is similar to human beings. From this liminal position, the creature looks at the human society with a strong and violent feeling of envy".[176] In fact, he feels he is different and ugly compared to the human beings that inhabit the world, and with reference to Victor's body he declares that "my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance" (p. 130). Clearly, when he carried out the creation of this hybrid being, Victor violated the biological sexual selection intrinsic in the evolutionary process, and thus subverted the natural order of human reproduction, creating a being that is "human" in regard to his feelings and intelligence, but "non-human" in terms of his physical appearance: the very existence of this creature brings into question the (re-)definition of what a human being is.

It might be argued that, given the superior physical features he is provided with, Frankenstein has actually managed to create a being that pushes the "normal" boundaries of humanity: "I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around I saw and heard of none like me" (p. 120). And the superior features he is furnished with are not limited to his body: since he manages to learn how to speak and read properly in a few months, it can be argued that his mental capacities exceed those of a normal human being too. Apparently, it seems finally possible to answer once and for all the question that hunts Frankenstein's creature since the moment he develops his first thoughts; when he repeatedly asks "Who was I? What was I?" (p.128), there is a chance to finally provide him with an answer, because not only did Mary Shelley write what is commonly identified as the very first Science Fiction novel in the history of literature, but she also created one of the first characters that can be rightfully labelled as "posthuman". Although Frankenstein's creature will always remain unnamed and it is not possible to define what

[176] F. Cimatti (2016), "Frankenstein on Language and Becoming (Post)Human", cit. p. 20.

kind of "species" he belongs to, thus denying him a chance of subjectivity, in the light of the contemporary re-evaluations of what constitutes a human being we can finally provide him with some kind of reassuring label; a creature that was conceived in a laboratory, a product of science and technology applied to human flash, a hybrid individual whose nature does not permit to completely include him in the human species, whose physical and mental capacities surpass those of an ordinary human being: indeed, when he created his "monster", Victor Frankenstein gave life to a being which, as Katherine Hayles stated, "does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human",[177] and forces to broaden the range of species that are allowed to coexist on Earth. Although his hybrid, artificial, scary body does not conform to the beauty standards that conventionally identify human beings – and as a consequence of this he is identified as a "monster" – his belonging to a new species can finally cease to be considered a valid reason to cast him away from social relations: the post-anthropocentric approach that posthumanism is founded upon, with its strong belief that the fact of belonging to the "human" realm does not grant people the right to be placed on top of the other species and cast them in a state of inferiority, seems to give Frankenstein's creature hope for acceptance. Of course, as I have argued before, we do not live in a fully posthuman world yet, but we are simply in a transient phase, and this implies that the re-creation of a similar subject (already an example of the posthuman from the biological perspective, but still a typical human subject from the psychological perspective) in our contemporary time would not automatically mean that it could be included and accepted within the human society: nowadays, a creature like Frankenstein's would probably still be treated just like a disabled person, having to face discrimination and fight against exclusion because of his body features. However, it would finally have the chance of making his voice heard, which is something that, in Mary Shelley's novel, seems to represent a possibility – though never accomplished – to access sympathy, acceptance, and a way out from the label of "monster".

In conclusion, the reasons why Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, the Modern Prometheus* continues to be read, appreciated and re-appraised two centuries after its first publication reside in the fact that the same themes Shelley considered of great interest at her time are still very much debated in our contemporary age: Frankenstein "stands as one of the classic representations of the fears and hopes engendered by humanity's

[177] N. K. Hayles (1999), *How We Became Posthuman*, cit., p. 286.

harnessing of technological power, and the ambivalence occasioned by the prospect of artificial intelligence, genetic modification, stem-cell research, prosthetic surgery and other interventions".[178] Moreover, Mary Shelley's depiction of Frankenstein's creature as an outcast subject, abandoned by his father and creator, "excite the reader's sympathies and challenge the conventions which demarcate the 'human' from the nonhuman or inhuman, or the 'natural' from the 'unnatural'",[179] providing a fruitful text to be analysed within the light of the developing posthuman movement. To conclude this chapter, I would like to quote a passage from Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which in my view shows how much of Wollstonecraft's legacy, her "faith in futurity and her hope that the light of reason might disentangle the worthwhile from the monstrous in new ideas"[180] was imbued in her daughter's thinking:

> If the power of reflecting on the past, and darting the keen eye of contemplation into futurity, be the grand privilege of man, it must be granted that some people enjoy this prerogative in a very limited degree. Every thing new appears to them wrong; and not able to distinguish the possible from the monstrous, they fear where no fear should find a place, running from the light of reason, as if it were a firebrand.[181]

[178] E. Graham (2016), "Shelley, Mary (Frankenstein)". *Genealogy of the Posthuman*. Available from: https://criticalposthumanism.net/shelley-mary-frankenstein/ [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].
[179] *Idem.*
[180] J. Clayton (2003), "Frankenstein's Futurity: Replicants and Robots". In E. Schor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., pp. 84-102, p. 84.
[181] M. Wollstonecraft (1975), *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman.* In C. H. Poston (ed.), New York: Norton, p. 151. Quoted in J. Clayton (2003), "Frankenstein's Futurity: Replicants and Robots", cit., p. 84.

CHAPTER 3 – A POSTHUMANIST READING OF *THE BODY* BY HANIF KUREISHI

3.1 - HANIF KUREISHI: THE COLONIAL LEGACIES OF A WESTERN MAN

Hanif Kureishi was born in Bromley, a South London suburb, in 1954. His mother was a middle-class English woman, while his father, who "harboured frustrated desires to become a writer",[182] came from a wealthy Indian upper-class family which had been displaced by the partition of India and Pakistan. Kureishi grew up experiencing on his skin the racial discrimination and cultural clashes that he later addressed in most of his early fiction: despite being born, raised and educated in England and claiming poor connections with his father's native land and language, he spent his teenage years in an environment still imbued with racism, where it was the colour of his skin – not as black as his father's, but still not 'white enough' as his mother's – that would define who he was, precluding him the 'privilege' of calling himself British. In the previous chapter, when analysing the social issues that Frankenstein's creature has to face throughout Mary Shelley's novel, I have introduced the theories developed by the French West Indian psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, and I think it is useful to refer to him once again to compare his experience with Kureishi's: the fact of feeling rejected by one's community is an experience common to both men, who, in different ways, managed to elaborate on their personal experiences and made these a central feature in the development of their works. Despite being born in the Caribbeans, within the French colony of Martinique Fanon received a French education and grew up feeling he was a child of the French Empire; so much so that during World War II he willingly left his native land and went to Europe in order to support the fight of France against Nazi Germany. However, when after the end of the war he decided to settle in France, he was forced to acknowledge that what he considered to be his home-country was not willing to accept him as a legitimate citizen: in fact, his clinical studies stemmed from his own experience of being made to feel as an outcast by the white French people who, because of the colour of his skin, would not see (and accept) him as one of them. Despite not being a psychiatrist, the psychological aspect of being cast in a state of otherness by the community he grew up in is widely explored by Kureishi by means of his literary works, in which elements of the author's biography

[182] "Hanif Kureishi", *British Library*. Available from: https://www.bl.uk/people/hanif-kureishi [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].

are often recognizable within the lives of the protagonists of his fiction.

> In the mid-1960s, Pakistanis were a risible subject in England, derided on television and exploited by politicians. They had the worst jobs, they were uncomfortable in England, some of them had difficulties with the language. They were despised and out of place.
> From the start I tried to deny my Pakistani self. I was ashamed. It was a curse and I wanted to be rid of it. I wanted to be like everyone else. I read with understanding a story in a newspaper about a black boy who, when he noticed that burnt skin turned white, jumped into a bath of boiling water.[183]

The inspiration for his early work was drawn from his own life's trials and tribulations as a hybrid subject, a condition that forced him into the role of 'cultural translator'; reluctantly, Kureishi became a mediator, at the crossroads of two different and apparently incompatible cultures – one of which, as he himself claims, was unknown to him at the time, since he visited Pakistan for the first time in his twenties and was never taught to speak Punjabi or Urdu. The fact that British people showed both repulsion and curiosity towards Oriental cultures led to the strong ambivalence that Kureishi explored in his first novel; moreover, the fact that both cultures rejected Kureishi, not fully recognizing him as a legitimate member of their communities, led to an ambiguous relationship between the writer and the two countries:

> Why would anyone with a brown face, Muslim name and large well-known family in Pakistan want to lay claim to that cold little decrepit island off Europe where you always had to spell your name? Strangely, anti-British remarks made me feel patriotic, though I only felt patriotic when I was away from England.
> But I couldn't allow myself to feel too Pakistani: I didn't want to give in to that falsity, that sentimentality. As someone said to me at a party, provoked by the fact I was wearing jeans: we are Pakistanis, but you, you will always be a Paki – emphasising the slang derogatory name the English used against Pakistanis; and therefore the fact that I couldn't rightfully lay claim to either place.[184]

I would like to point out that, even-though his family's background has been directly affected by Britain's colonial endeavours, Kureishi himself resists his automatic inclusion in the category of postcolonial writing: as Judith Misrahi-Barak observed, "Kureishi is not quite part of the post-colonial crowd: he was not born in a former British colony, he did not exile himself like many first-generation writers, he does not speak the mother-

[183] H. Kureishi (2005), "The Rainbow Sign". In H. Kureishi (2005), *The Word and the Bomb*. London: Faber and Faber, pp. 13-35, p. 15.
[184] *Idem*, pp. 23-24.

tongue of his parents".[185] Kureishi is a fully Westernized child of an immigrant father, he is not a "displaced post-colonial writing *back* to the centre"; rather "he writes *from* the centre".[186] For this reason, some scholars – Moore-Gilbert in particular among them – have attempted to place him within the British literary tradition, a place where Kureishi himself – a native of England and lifelong monoglot – plainly believes he belongs.[187]

Kureishi read philosophy at King's College, University of London, and then supported himself by writing pornographic stories using the pen-name Antonia French; during his youth he also started working as an usher at the Royal Theatre and later he managed to become the theatre's writer in residence. In 1976, the London's Theatre Upstairs produced his first play, *Soaking Up the Heat*, which was followed by *The Mother Country*, that won the Thames Television Playwright Award in 1980. He started gaining popularity when the Royal Court Theatre produced *Borderline*, a play about Asian immigrants living in London. This led him to have another play, *Outskirts*, performed by London's Royal Shakespeare Company.

In the same years Kureishi started writing screenplays for the film industry, leading him to be especially successful in the United States: his 1985 screenplay for *My Beautiful Laundrette*, directed by Stephen Frears, tells the story of a young second-generation Pakistani immigrant who opens a laundromat in London with the help of his gay, white lover. Critics from both sides of the Atlantic praised Kureishi; however, several conservative Pakistani organizations felt that their communities were being portrayed in a negative manner, as homosexuals and drug dealers. To them,

> a character of Pakistani origin represented the entire Pakistani community, and should display a positive stereotype to American and British audiences. [However,] Kureishi rejects the politics of representation; he does not assume this role as an ambassador representing a minority, preferring to depict the harsher realities of racism and class divisions.[188]

After *My Beautiful Laundrette* won several awards, among which the Best Screenplay award from the New York Film Critics Circle, Kureishi wrote another screenplay, with

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[185] J. Misrahi-Barak (1998), "The Scope of Fiction in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*: From Margin to Margin and Back to the Centre". *Études Britanniques Contemporaines: Revue de la Société d'Études Anglaises Contemporaines*. 13 (January 1998): 31-39, p. 37. Quoted in B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, New York: Palmgrave Macmillian, p. 148.

[186] S. Thomas (ed.) (2005), *Hanif Kureishi: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 1. Quoted in B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*. Cit., p. 13.

[187] See B. Moore-Gilbert (2001), *Hanif Kureishi*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

[188] S. Sharma (1997), "Kureishi, Hanif". In *Postcolonial Studies @ Emory*. Available from: https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2014/06/11/kureishi-hanif/ [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].

the controversial title *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987). In this film Kureishi explored the world of racially-mixed couples living in London during the race riots; however, this was not received as well as his previous film. His screenplays include, among others, *The Mother* (2003), *Venus* (2006), *Le Week-End* (2013).

Kureishi made his debut on the literary scene in 1990, when he published his first semi-autobiographical novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which opens with the protagonist's self-introduction:

> My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care – Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere.[189]

Drawing from Kureishi's own experiences, *The Buddha of Suburbia* is about the life of a young bisexual man, who is half-Asian and half-English, who grows up in the London suburbs longing for the time when he can finally move to the big city. In the meantime, he educates himself with classic novels and the best pop music of the time. It is not a case that Kureishi himself, in an autobiographical essay, thus described his own youth:

> I was only waiting now to go away, to leave the London suburbs, to make another kind of life, somewhere else, with better people.
> In this isolation, in my bedroom where I listened to the Pink Floyd, the Beatles and the John Peel show, I started to write down the speeches of politicians, the words which helped create the neo-Nazi attitudes I saw around me.[190]

Full of expectations for his future, the protagonist of *The Buddha of Suburbia* is compelled to find his own place in Britain, which he describes as "a nice place if you're rich, but otherwise it's a fucking swamp of prejudice, class confusion, the whole thing".[191] Pop music and the demolition of class boundaries are tightly connected in Kureishi's view, who, in an interview, declared that:

> One of the things that happened in the sixties was that you were slightly liberated from your sense of class, because the pop stars that we knew, who were mostly lower middle class, like John Lennon or The Who, had liberated themselves from the straightjacket of class. We identified with them and felt that we could then make our way to London, in culture, in pop, in fashion.[192]

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[189] H. Kureishi (1990), *The Buddha of Suburbia*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 3.
[190] H. Kureishi (2005), *The Rainbow Sign*, cit., p. 17.
[191] H. Kureishi (1990), *The Buddha of Suburbia*, cit., p. 256.
[192] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi,* cit., pp. 111-112.

Ambition and class issues, as well as sexual curiosity and generational conflicts, are central themes in Kureishi's first novel, but racism and the dream of a multi-cultural London are the real issues at stake: when in 1967 Enoch Powell said that, because of the Pakistani immigrants, "[Britain would] not be worth living in for our children" and, in the same year, the Conservative politician Duncan Sandys declared that "the breeding of millions of half-caste children would […] produce a generation of misfits and create national tension", young Hanif was ready to state that "I wasn't a misfit. I could join the elements of myself together. It was the others, they wanted misfits; they wanted you to embody within yourself their ambivalence".[193]

The Buddha of Suburbia won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award for the first-novel category of the Booksellers Association of Great Britain and Ireland and in 1993 a TV series drawn from the novel was released, featuring a soundtrack written and arranged by David Bowie. In 1991, Kureishi made his directorial debut with *London Kills Me*, which he also wrote; in this film he expanded on his interest in street life, by focusing on the world of drugs and gangs. In 1994 he published his first collection of short stories, *Love in a Blue Time.*

In his 1995 novel, *The Black Album*, Kureishi delves into "the painful, lonely, and confused world of [Shahid], a young man of Pakistani origin, who finds himself having to choose between his white British lover and his Muslim friends".[194] The novel makes many references to pop culture, especially music and drugs, which feature in a great deal of Kureishi's work. This novel, as well as his renowned short story *My Son the Fanatic* (published in the 1994 collection *Love in a Blue Time*), deals with the issue of fully-Westernized second-generation immigrants who turn to Islamic fundamentalism as an act of rebellion against the racist society in which they were raised: in the violent wing of the same religion their fathers had rejected as a way to detach themselves from the cultural traditions of the countries they moved away from, the children find a locus of resistance and communal help. The theatre adaptation of *The Black Album* was performed at the National Theatre, in London, in July and August 2009. With regard to Kureishi's first two novels, Bradley Buchanan observed that:

> [they] are distinct from the rest of his fiction in that they show two young men attempting to mediate between their individualistic, knowledge-and-pleasure-seeking urges, and the traditional morality and emotional support offered by

[193] H. Kureishi (2005), *The Rainbow Sign*, cit., p. 17.
[194] S. Sharma (1997), "Kureishi, Hanif". In *Postcolonial Studies @ Emory*, cit..

> the nuclear family and religion. While Karim seems more successful than Shahid at balancing these forces, both novels assume that such a balance is desirable and, in a better world, possible. Kureishi's later fiction will suggest otherwise, but these two early novels hold out a tantalizing promise: that we can have the cake of our desires and eat it in good conscience too. If others see a conflict between Karim's family and his career, or between Shahid's love of sex and drugs and his religious inclinations, there is no special reason to worry. Contradictions are in the eye of the beholder, in Kureishi's early fiction, and his ingenuous heroes happily pursue apparently incompatible courses with equal ardour. They escape serious consequences, primarily because of their youth. Kureishi's later, older characters, who have become fathers and husbands, will not be so fortunate.[195]

By then, Kureishi was married with film-and-television producer Tracey Scoffield and the couple had had two twin sons. The novelty of family life was soon reflected in the writer's work, and Buchanan acknowledges that "an important shift in Kureishi's work occurs when his protagonists cease to be young men and become paternal figures themselves".[196] However, the trope of "dysfunctional families" that also characterized Kureishi's early novels and stories remains, in that, "unwilling to admit their desire to retain the authority they once resented in others, [Kureishi's male characters] absent themselves from the familiar circle by infidelity or some other form of mid-life crisis".[197] The issue of race becomes less visible in his later fiction, which instead centres on the "trials and tribulations of private life",[198] especially marriage and parenthood, often conveying the discouraging message that "family and sexual problems erode life's pleasures".[199] In fact, Kureishi's characters are now grown-up men whose "youthful air of innocence [has] gone";[200] and even though they are not willing to forsake the hedonism that characterised their youth, they are now forced to realize that "the power of the father is not a purely artificial construction that has been forced on them, but rather an important aspect of their own identities".[201]

His 1998 novel *Intimacy* revolves around the story of a man who is about to leave his wife and two young sons after feeling physically and emotionally rejected by his wife; the story opens immersing the reader in the psychological turmoil of the irresolute protagonist, an oppressive feeling that is consistent throughout the whole novel:

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[195] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit., p. 68.
[196] *Idem*, p. 86.
[197] *Idem*, p. 36.
[198] *Idem*, p. 69.
[199] *Idem*, p. 70.
[200] *Idem*, p. 36.
[201] *Ibidem.*

> It is the saddest night, for I am leaving and not coming back. Tomorrow morning, when the woman I have lived with for six years has gone to work on her bicycle, and our children have been taken to the park with their ball, I will pack some things into a suitcase, slip out of my house hoping that no one will see me, and take the tube to Victor's place. […] Soon we will be like strangers. No, we can never be that. Hurting someone is an act of reluctant intimacy. We will be dangerous acquaintances with a history.[202]

After its release, the novel created some controversy, as Kureishi had recently left his own partner and their two young sons; therefore, once again the novel was assumed to be at least semi-autobiographical. In 2001 the novel was adapted into a film, *Intimacy* by Patrice Chéreau, which won two Bears at the Berlin Film Festival: a Golden Bear for Best Film and a Silver Bear for Best Actress (Kerry Fox). As *Intimacy* demonstrates, "once race has been relegated to the background, the disintegration of the family becomes the major theme of Kureishi's fiction. The cause of this familial breakdown are simple enough: middle-aged men who desert their joyless relationships in pursuit of keener sensations, whether sexual, chemical or emotional".[203]

In 2003 he published the short-story collection *The Body and Seven Stories*, whose opening novella will be analysed in the next few pages. Kureishi's 2004 book, *My Ear at His Heart*, is a partial biography of his father, Rafiushan Kureishi, and an account of his father's obsessive literary strivings and setbacks. According to Buchanan, "there is a strong sense that the book is an attempt to displace the burden of guilt Kureishi has carried for many years, by virtue of having succeeded where his father had failed".[204] He also published *Dreaming and Scheming: Reflections on Writing and Politics* (2002) and *The Word and the Bomb* (2008), two collection of essays in which he explores many of the topics that influenced his thinking and writing. In 2008 he was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE), in recognition for his services to literature and drama. In 2011 he was victim of a fraud, in which he nearly lost all his life savings; he then narrated those events in *A Theft: My Con Man* (2014), which was later included in the 2015 collection of stories and essays *Love+Hate*.

As Kureishi ages, so do his characters: the protagonists of his two most recent novels, *The Last Word* (2014) and *The Nothing* (2017) are both old, ill men; two former artists – a novelist and film-maker – who enjoy their late years with their attractive and much-younger wives. And even though their aged bodies don't let them pursue the

[202] H. Kureishi (1998), *Intimacy*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 4.
[203] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit., p. 76.
[204] *Idem*, p. 146.

hedonistic urges that distinguished their youth, they don't allow their minds to rest: they keep an eye on what is going on around them, because "[as] an artist you have to force yourself to turn and look at the world, and the world is always worse, and more interesting, than you can imagine or render".[205] Given the many obvious connections that appear between Kureishi's work and the broad movements of his life, it is difficult to avoid the hypothesis that Kureishi's work is "primarily autobiographical rather than social, or confessional rather than political":[206]

> His own upbringing, family life and early education seem to have produced the Freud-inflected pessimism about love and sex that his characters express so frequently, and his later struggles with substance abuse, marital problems and paternal responsibility colour his vision of the world considerably. Furthermore, this personal aspect of Kureishi's work is weighted towards childhood and adolescence; although Kureishi is now middle-aged and enjoys the lifestyle of a successful author and celebrity, his work continues to be marked by the tragic sexual and racial conflicts that marked his early life. His oft-professed interest in popular culture's portrayal of young people, therefore, is perhaps as much a symptom of his preoccupation with his own youth as it is a systematic engagement with the overall political and social trends of his era.[207]

In the latter part of Kureishi's literary production, his outlook on life seems much more tragic and conflicted: his once-carefree characters have been "dragged into the mud of maturity, where they become husbands, fathers, divorcé(e)s, men and women with stagnant careers, and self-hating failures. The battle between pleasure and morality has become a bloody one, and most of his heroes have chosen the former".[208] His characters' rejection of traditional bonds and stable relationships is often an attempt to escape from the torments of their adulthood, which only become more painful when the innocence of childhood is recalled. These books are "sad, angry, despairing testaments to the difficulties that attend one's adult obligations, whether one accepts them fully or not".[209]

3.2 - «ALL I WANT IS TO BE RID OF THIS, TO GET OUT OF THIS MEAT»: AN INTRODUCTION TO *THE BODY*

In the previous pages I have pointed out that the second part of Kureishi's production is

[205] H. Kureishi (2014), "A Theft: My Con Man". In H. Kureishi (2017), *Love+Hate*, London: Faber and Faber, pp. 179-217, p. 217.
[206] B. Buchanan (2007) *Hanif Kureishi*, cit. p. 39.
[207] *Idem*, p. 39.
[208] *Idem*, p. 91.
[209] *Idem*, p. 92.

considerably different from his earlier works, in that it is characterised by the increasingly strong theme of "mid-life crisis" that affects his male heroes – or rather antiheroes, since even though they are often distinguished by a general dissatisfaction towards their everyday lives, they usually react to that by running away from their responsibilities, and in particular from their disappointing relationships and family bounds. In fact, it has been noted that "the cinematic and novelistic multiculturalism which [Kureishi] largely pioneered in Britain with *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Buddha of Suburbia* has given way to compressed tales of family and the self".[210] Moreover, in the works he published at the beginning of the 2000s, Kureishi momentarily put aside his traditional realist and semi-autobiographical style and decided to experiment with some relatively uncharacteristic fictional strategies, employing a "somewhat inconsistent version of magical realism"[211] in *Gabriel's Gift*, published in 2001, and using a science-fiction premise in *The Body*, published in 2002 as a single novel and then republished in the same year as the eponymous novella that opens the collection of short stories *The Body and Seven Stories*.

Bradley Buchanan claims that artistic creativity is the new, dominant theme in both *Gabriel's Gift* and *The Body*, and this will be a relevant topic also in the 2014 novel *The Last Word* and in *The Nothing*, published in 2017. In all these novels, Kureishi "minimizes concerns such as race and class", which strongly identified his earlier production, "instead concentrating on family, personal identity (especially in terms of gender and masculinity), sexual experimentation and artistic achievement".[212] As Kureishi's work progresses, he seems increasingly eager to use family troubles "not merely to examine the plight of his tormented fathers, boyfriends and husbands, but also to explore the escape and fulfilment offered to them by the process of artistic and creative achievement".[213] Indeed, the premise that propels Adam, the protagonist of *The Body,* to embark on his adventure is a longing for a breath of fresh air in his creative works: for too long he has been feeling increasingly marginalized by the world surrounding him, from which he feels to be disconnecting as times goes by. According to him, this has been affecting his latest works, which are not as compelling as those he used to produce when his young body allowed him to be part of the social world: he perceives his old, withering

[210] A. Linklater (2002), "Death of the Ego", *The Guardian*. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/16/fiction.hanifkureishi [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].
[211] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit., p. 92.
[212] *Idem*, p. 93.
[213] *Idem*, p. 87.

body as an enemy that prevents him from living his life to its fullest, increasingly confining him in a state of social exclusion. Waldo, the protagonist of Kureishi's 2017 novel *The Nothing*, expresses the same feelings: "I wish, even in this state, that I had a final project, something to fill me with creative hope. Whoever heard of an artist retiring? We become more frantic to fulfil ourselves as we age".[214] According to Buchanan, *The Body* is "another eloquent testament to [Kureishi's] abiding obsession with the power of youth, and another recognition of how central this power is to his conception of contemporary culture".[215] So much so that, in his reading of Kureishi's works, he claims that, for the writer, "our political lives – which concern our racial, religious, class and gender identities – matter much less than does the fact of being (or having once been) teenagers. Kureishi comes close to making youth into its own cultural ideology, albeit a provisional and self-consciously superficial one".[216]

The protagonist and first-person narrator of the novella, Adam, is a middle-aged, almost-forgotten, London-based playwright, screenwriter and novelist, whose "heyday of theatre production is long over. He is greatly troubled by his 'ailing existence' and feels out of touch with real life",[217] having realized that his life seems "to have happened too quickly" (p. 17).[218] Like most people of his age, Adam sees and feels the impact of the years on his body; moreover, he is all too aware of his own approaching mortal destiny (so much so, that his memoirs is titled 'Too Late'). Adam is tired and wishes to restore his curiosity about the world surrounding him, in which he now feels like an outcast: "I no longer believe or hope that book knowledge will satisfy or even entertain me, and if I watch TV for too long I begin to feel hollow" (p. 5); he laments:

> I am no longer familiar with the pop stars, actors, or serials on TV [...] It is like trying to take part in a conversation of which I can only grasp a fraction. As for the politicians, I can barely make out which side they are on. My age, education, and experience seem to be no advantage. I imagine that to participate in the world with curiosity and pleasure, to see the point of what is going on, you have to be young and uninformed. Do I want to participate? (p. 5)

Adam is aware that the natural ageing process his body is undergoing is the main source

[214] H. Kureishi (2017), *The Nothing*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 11.
[215] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit., p. 29.
[216] *Idem*, p. 30.
[217] M. Oppolzer (2009), "The Body", Universitat Salzburg. Available from: https://www.sbg.ac.at/alien/index.php?title=The_Body [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].
[218] This quote, as well as all the following ones from the text of the novella are drawn from: H. Kureishi (2002), *The Body and Seven Stories*, London: Faber and Faber. Page numbers are given in parenthesis.

of his tribulations, and helplessly witnesses the decay of his body and of all the bodies around him: "I got up and briefly talked to my friends – the old fucks with watery eyes" (p. 16). He no longer feels entertained when talking with his peers: "we would talk of grand-children, hospitals, funerals and memorial services, saying how much we missed so-and-so, wondering, all the while, who would be next, when it would be our turn" (pp. 10-11). Among others commentators, Alexander Linklater argued that, just like the protagonist of *Intimacy*, Adam is another version of the "Kureishi persona", with the exception that in this case the fictional character is "flabbier and more decrepit than the real thing":[219] having "sharpened a style on his own midlife crisis", Kureishi now analyses the difficulties of living as an aged man and "his struggle to maintain his self-esteem and joie de vivre prompts him to give a very cynical account of the old people's situation in a society ruled by beauty, youth and desire".[220] Therefore, he does not indulge in stereotypes that depict the elderly as wise and respected people: in "The Body", "old people are submitted to the reign of flesh over society, just as much as anyone else",[221] and indeed, since old people are often tired and unhealthy, they cannot actively take part in social events and are therefore cast aside.

At the beginning of the novella, during a theatre party where established directors and writers mingle with young, aspiring actors, Adam is approached by Ralph, one of those he labels as "young and uninformed" (p. 5). Adam feels uncomfortable among these people, because "[t]he young appear as sheer enemies, whose needs terrify the old: their vocabulary is incomprehensible, their presence is threatening";[222] however, to Adam's surprise, Ralph turns out to be an affable person, as well as a great admirer of his works, and he claims to have seen some of Adam's theatrical performances that must have taken place long before his biological birth. According to Menard, Ralph appears as a *Deus Ex Machina*, who has come "to save him and help him overcome his despair":[223] Ralph tells Adam of a clinic that is pioneering a new, expensive technique, and where "[c]ertain old, rich men and women were having their living brains removed and transplanted into the bodies of the young dead" (p. 12). If he dared undergoing the exclusive surgery, Adam would have the chance to become someone else, while retaining his memory and thoughts;

[219] A. Linklater, "Death of the Ego", cit..
[220] L. Menard, *Fiche de lecture:* The Body*, Hanif Kureishi*. Available from: http://cle.ens-lyon.fr/anglais/litterature/litterature-britannique/fiche-de-lecture-the-body-hanif-kureishi [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].
[221] *Idem.*
[222] *Idem*.
[223] *Idem.*

he would then be able to do all the things that young people enjoy doing, but with the benefit of all the knowledge and experience he has stored during the sixty years he has spent in his old body. At first Adam does not believe the story, but Ralph's own account of the second chance the operation has provided him are so convincing that he eventually agrees to temporarily transplant his brain into a "new facility" (p. 27).

Among others, Menard and Colway agree that the Science Fiction premises of the novella are quite inconsistent: little do we know about the actual surgery and the technology behind it, and this is something that, quite surprisingly, Adam himself is little interested in as well; however, even though "this is very bad science, [it works as] a good fictional set-up":[224] Kureishi provides himself a device for "extending his peculiar form of meditative narration. Adam's journey verges on the theoretical, a reflection on the extent to which the body is a bearer of human identity, and how much the needs of the young terrify the old".[225] In fact, Susie Thomas argues that, given Kureishi's lack of "interest in the medical or mechanical aspects of brains being implanted into recently deceased bodies, [*The Body*] does not read like science fiction but rather allegory or fable",[226] and Menard shares the same view when she states that:

> placing most of Adam's adventures in Greece, Hanif Kureishi implicitly compares his character to Greek mythological figures such as Apollo and Dionysius: Adam has Apollo's wonderfully built body superbly crafted features, and Dionysus's taste for orgies and sexual pleasure. And of course Adam resembles them in the sense he has become immortal... Or one might also be reminded of Ulysses, especially when Adam has to fight some sexual temptations while on a cruise boat.[227]

Finally persuaded to venture in this experience, Adam accepts the risks of this extreme form of surgery and he has the chance to "undergo a peculiar metamorphosis",[228] as he tries to remake himself and escape the dullness of his old age: given the opportunity to escape his own decay, he finally lives the dream of combining the virility and stamina of a 25-year-old's sensual body with the wisdom and life-experience of his original brain. It is therefore an opportunity that Adam cannot resist, but he cautiously agrees to a short "six-month sabbatical" (p. 19): in fact, he admits that he is not "particularly unhappy" (p.

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[224] J. Colwey (2002), "You're as Young as You Feel...", *The Guardian*. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/nov/03/fiction.hanifkureishi [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].
[225] A. Linklater, "Death of the Ego", cit..
[226] S. Thomas (ed.) (2005), *Hanif Kureishi: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, p. 154. Quoted in B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit, p. 93.
[227] L. Menard, "Fiche de lecture: *The Body*, Hanif Kureishi", cit..
[228] J. Colwey (2002), "You're as Young as You Feel..."

21) with his life, and what he wants is just a short holiday from his decaying body, to "be cured of [….] indifference, slight depression or weariness" (p. 30), so that "he can later reflect on the meaning of deterioration".[229]

Adam's new shell (the peculiar choice of which will be further analysed in the next few pages) is the gorgeous corpse of a young man in his mid-20s, with a muscular body, tanned skin, soft brown eyes and a "fine, thick penis and heavy balls" (p. 25). In his new persona, Adam then embraces his new life with renewed vigour and passion, embarking in an odyssey of physical hedonism. It is interesting to notice that even though – as it was mentioned earlier – what had propelled Adam to undergo the surgery had been the longing to "participate" again in the world in order to fuel his artistic production, once he has assumed his new body he decides that "writing [...] was a habit I needed to break" (p. 85). Adam's physical transformation seems to become a replacement for his earlier forms of artistic self-expression, turning his own new body into a sort of canvas, a piece of art that he is ready to exhibit to the world, because as he soon notices, "[n]ot that beauty, or life itself, means much if you're in a room on your own. Heaven is other people" (p. 35), and so "[in] our new gear we went to bars suitable for looking at others as we enjoyed them looking at us" (pp. 52-53). He then trades his curiosity in the world for the pleasure of being looked, and in fact Kureishi makes it clear that "having reattained youthful vigour, Adam/Leo no longer has any need to be creative or even intellectually active"[230] when the protagonist notes, with some satisfaction, that "I was almost free of the desire to understand" (p. 69).

"Smoothly and painlessly transferred to this new excellent vehicle",[231] Adam renames himself Leo Raphael Adams, after some among the greatest artists of the Renaissance, and starts wandering around Europe, enjoying a variety of casual conversations with people of any sorts and taking odd jobs. As many critics have highlighted, being this a Kureishi story it is not surprising that the previously mentioned fine, thick penis is "quickly put into action whenever a suitable opportunity [presents] itself";[232] Adam describes his renewed sexual appeal as follows: "I was all sex, a walking prick, a penis with an appended body" (p. 78).[233] And if his *Oldbody* - this is the technical

[229] A. Linklater, "Death of the Ego", cit..
[230] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit., p. 108.
[231] J. Updike (2004), "Mind/Body Problems", *The New Yorker*. Available from: http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/01/26/040126crbo_books [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].
[232] A. Hue (2014), *Hanif Kureishi: The Body*. Available from: https://angelinahue.com/2014/04/05/hanif-kureishi-the-body-review/ [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].
[233] In my view there is a direct reference to Kureishi's short story "The Penis", published in his 1999

term that identifies 'normal' people throughout the novella, those who have not undergone the surgery (yet) - could not cope any longer with the stunts of physical intimacy, as a *Newbody* "I began to like the pornographic circus of rough sex [...] I begged to be turned into meat, held down, tied, blindfolded, slapped, pulled, and strangled, entirely merged in the physical, all my swirling selves sucked into orgasm" (p. 58), fully enjoying the stamina offered by his new, energetic body.

However, if at first he is excited by the opportunities his new life offers him, little by little his second youth turns out to be a succession of loneliness, mechanical sex and bad, unsatisfying jobs. "Real youth requires innocence, or at least ignorance, and what Adam finds he values most is his knowledge of the world and the world's knowledge of him", Linklater claims, commenting on the novella: in his temporary new persona the protagonist cannot allow himself the pleasure of creating lasting relationships, and he is bound to wander around the world, making do of fleeting meetings with random strangers to whom he cannot reveal his real self: "What I miss," he says in his loneliness, "is giving people the pleasure of knowing about me" (p. 96). Increasingly, he feels like a prisoner inside the new body he has purchased, and just like he used to feel like a disoriented outcast as a "famous oldster in London cultural circles", so he does once again "as a beautiful youngster in the party circles of Europe".[234] Although "The Body" is mainly set in "the cosmopolitan and highly superficial world of European art, fashion, and society events",[235] a long stretch of the narrative is set in a 'spiritual centre' on a remote Greek island, where elderly, rich women can relax and meditate. After weeks of relentless enjoyment and wandering, Adam ends up taking an oddjob at this women's retreat centre where the middle-aged clients and even the centre's founder, facing what they perceive as the end of their desirability, enjoy flirting and looking at him; and Adam, in his renewed narcissism, is more than happy to let them do it.

It is at an exclusive party on a yacht that Adam meets Matte, and soon the yacht's wealthy owner reveals him that he is a *Newbody* too, just like most of the guests attending the party. Adam is excited of finally meeting someone like him, and he hopes to engage Matte and the other *Newbodies* in a discussion of their peculiar state: "[t]he thing I missed most in my new life was the opportunity to discuss – and, therefore, think about properly

collection *Midnight All Day*: in one of his earlier attempts with the grotesque and absurd style, Kureishi stages a re-writing of the Russian dramatist Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol's short story "The Nose" (1835-1836), in which a man's 'appendix' leaves his owner's body and develops a life of his own.

[234] J. Updike (2004), "Mind/Body Problems", cit.

[235] M. Oppolzer (2009), "The Body", cit.

– the implications of becoming a Newbody" (p. 51), but Matte is not a chatter:

> 'They do talk about it, "the newies". But I want to live, not chatter. I love being a funky dirty young man. I love pouting my sexy lips and being outstanding at tennis. My serve could knock your face off! You should have seen me before. I've got the photographs somewhere. What's the point of being rich if you're lopsided and have a harelip? It was a joke, a mistake that I came out alive like that! This is the real me!' (p. 96)

Matte is probably the most ambiguous character in the whole story: if he was to be classified in traditional terms, he would be identified as the villain and, in fact, his aggressive behaviour and thirst for power perfectly suit the 'bad guy' portrait. However, to a more in-depth analysis he is not as negative a character as he seems at first: it is true that he is willing to do anything to get hold of Adam's new body, even killing him if necessary, but his motives for wanting it are selfless: his old and sick brother is terminally ill, and Matte wants to buy a new "facility" for him too. Matte also informs Adam and the readers that this is not the first time he has donated a body to someone in need: in some kind of philanthropist generosity, he has given an old child psychologist a new, female body: "When he was ill, not long ago, I paid for him to become a Newbody. He had arthritis and was bent double. He needed to finish his book and to continue help others, as a woman. Don't you think that's a pretty charitable thing? […] She's not sweeping the floor somewhere and chasing sex" (p. 101). According to Buchanan, "Matte comes to seem an unwitting agent of morality who punishes Adam/Leo for his hubristic transgression of natural, familiar and human laws".[236] Indeed, this is the point when Adam's 'promethean fate', as it is mentioned in the title of this thesis, starts to become clear: although the readers of Kureishi's novella can easily sympathize with the protagonist, since they share both his reasoning and, most likely, his curiosity about the opportunities offered by the surgery – after all, "Who hasn't asked: Why can't I be someone else? Who, really, wouldn't want to live again, given the chance?" (p. 13) –, towards the end of the novella it becomes clear that Adam has made the wrong choice and is being punished for having been so careless about the possible consequences of the surgery and for having abandoned his wife and family, telling them he was going on a six-month sabbatical when, in fact, he was just traveling around Europe having sex with whomever caught his attention. Continuing on the trope of the aforementioned allegorical fable, Menard maintains that "the reader does not pity him too much when he ends as a

[236] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit., p. 101.

new Sisyphus, bound to live forever and ever, to make meaningless encounters and discoveries, and to remain unable to share true thoughts and feelings with his loved ones".[237] Indeed, it is at this point that Adam starts worrying again for his dear ones and decides to go back to London, where his family lives; however, he is still in disguise and can only follow his wife Margot and spy on her. This is when Adam fully realizes that in his new body he misses the emotions he was used to when he inhabited his old 'facility' and, most of all, he misses the chance of sharing his feelings with the people he loves, especially his wife. When he manages to talk to her, he gets to know a woman that for too long he had neglected and whose love and company he had taken for granted:

> Her story made more sense to me now, or I was able to let more of it in. We drank tea and wine. She was stimulated by my interest, and amazed by how much there was to tell. She wanted to speak; I wanted to listen […] I wanted to offer her all that I'd neglected to give in the past few years. How withdrawn and insulated I'd been! It would be different when I returned as myself. (p. 117)

Adam feels like a stranger in his own house, and sadly realizes that his wife and children have carried on with their lives; they have accepted his desire to run away and have set him free: "I was also shocked by how forgettable, or how disposable, I seemed to be. For years, as children, our parents have us believe they could not live without us. This necessity, however, never applies in the same way again, though perhaps we cannot stop looking for it" (p. 118). To reverse his condition of estrangement, he realizes that he wants his old, mortal body – and therefore his old life – back as soon as possible: "all I want is to get rid of this, to get out of this meat" (p. 122) he says, announcing his final resolution. Kureishi's novella closes with a chase, ending back at the clinic where the surgery had been performed. However, the place is now empty and derelict, electricity has been cut off and Adam's old body has disappeared. And when Matte's henchmen predictably appear, the only chance he has to escape is to threaten to damage his own body, the only valuable thing he is left with: "[e]ventually Leo's borrowed body becomes a mere commodity, for which there exists a competing bidder",[238] and the novella closes with Adam's foreboding words: "I was a stranger on the earth, a nobody with nothing, belonging nowhere, a body alone, condemned to begin again, in the nightmare of eternal life" (p. 126). It might be argued that the fact of using a past tense at the beginning of this final sentence might imply that Adam actually managed to find a way out of his

[237] L. Menard, "Fiche de lecture: *The Body*, Hanif Kureishi", cit..
[238] J. Updike (2004), "Mind/Body Problems", cit..

nightmarish condition and that, back to his original body, he is now recalling his adventures in order to warn the readers not to make the same mistakes. However, the general atmosphere that surrounds the ending of the novella is dominated by a sense of hopelessness and defeat that is hard to ignore, and this does not surprise: Kureishi's protagonists are never granted a truly happy ending and are often left to ponder whether the drastic decisions they have taken have actually led them to live a better life. Buchanan claims that "Kureishi's protagonists often feel as if they have begun life all over again when they leave their wives and children, and *The Body* takes this idea of a new beginning to a nightmarish extreme".[239] In fact, I find that, even though the two texts are extremely different in style and themes, a strong parallel in the plot development can be identified between his debut novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* and *The Body*: both Haroon (the Buddha mentioned in the title of the novel, who is the protagonist's father) and Adam are aged men who, tired of the dullness of their domestic everyday lives, flee in search of new emotions without any initial regret of what they leave behind: the first leaves his wife for a younger and more active woman, the second leaves his body for a younger and more active self. At first, they both embrace the new, exciting opportunities offered by their new life, but they soon come to realise that "the greatest horror is losing everything you've used up a lifetime getting used to",[240] and by the time they come to realise this, they are also forced to acknowledge that the world has moved forward without waiting for them; and since there is no way to turn back time, they now find themselves stuck in their new, once-apparently-idyllic life. Eventually, in both novels Kureishi seems to recognize that "the familiar isn't necessarily mundane"[241] and apparently he wants to emphasize that it is only when you have lost it, that you understand the real value of what you have left behind and cannot get back:

> In my straighter moments, despite everything, I wanted to be close to my wife. I loved to watch her walk about the house, to hear her undress, to touch her things. She would lie in bed reading and I would smell her, moving up and down her body like an old dog, nose twitching. I still hadn't been all the way round her. Her flesh creased, folded, and sagged, its colour altering, but I had never desired her because she was perfect, but because she was she. (p. 61)

In addition to this, when in *The Buddha of Suburbia* young Karim glimpses into socialite

[239] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit. p. 102.
[240] S. Zacharek (2004), "'The Body' by Hanif Kureishi", *Salon*. Available from: https://www.salon.com/2004/03/08/kureishi_2/ [Last accessed on March 1, 2020]
[241] *Ibidem*.

Charlie's exuberant lifestyle, he declares that "I wanted to live always this intensely: mysticism, alcohol, sexual promise, clever people and drugs";[242] and, as for Charlie himself, he declares that "I coveted his talents, face, style. I wanted to wake up with them all transferred to me",[243] which is, in fact, what the protagonist of *The Body* experiences: he can be young and irresponsible again, but better-looking this time. In the end, "[l]ike all tales of eternal youth, this one asks us to consider the problem of answered prayers":[244] Adam, like most of Kureishi's characters, does not resist the urge to satisfy his hedonistic desires, and his carefree attitude is eventually punished in what Kureishi himself seems to consider a deserved way:

> [W]hen characters lose themselves in their desire for satisfaction, and since we can all be overwhelmed and disturbed by pleasure, it is also where characters reveal themselves the most. We identify with their alternative morality as they cross lines we'd never dare approach. These characters aren't undecided about things; they don't care; they are freer than us. They are usually punished too, which contributes to our satisfaction: the world is re-balanced. We are not in a hellish, never-ending spiral of wild enjoyment.[245]

3.3 - Ageing Issues and the Youth Myth: the Commodification of the Body

> What had disturbed him was that at least three people had failed to recognize him, not out of cruelty or even short-sightedness. It was worse than that: they had no idea who he was. He had made a simple mistake, one he swore he would never make again – he had aged.[246]

This quote is not drawn from the text of "The Body"; in fact, the sentence refers to the protagonist of "The Woman Who Fainted", another short story written by Hanif Kureishi and published in his 2015 collection *Love+Hate*. This is to suggest that ageing is indeed an increasingly present theme in his literary production and that, even more than the fact of growing old, Kureishi's characters (and probably the author too) fear the consequences connected to the passing of time: those of an ever-changing body that makes them increasingly unrecognisable in the eyes of the others and that, in turn, makes the outer world increasingly foreign to them. In this chapter I am going to analyse how Kureishi

[242] H. Kureishi (1990), *The Buddha of Suburbia*, cit., p. 15.
[243] *Ibidem*, p. 15.
[244] B. Kunkel (2004), *You've Got to Have Pecs*, The New York Times. Available from: https://www.nytimes.com/2004/02/29/books/you-ve-got-to-have-pecs.html [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].
[245] Hanif Kureishi (2019), *What Happened?,* London: Faber and Faber, p. 92.
[246] H. Kureishi (2015), *Love+Hate*, London: Faber and Faber, p. 132.

approached the social struggle his ageing protagonist undergoes to in "The Body", as well as the strategy that he employs to make his protagonist attempt to run away from the threats posed by his own *Oldbody*. This is how Adam describes his "old carcass" at the beginning of the novella:

> Want to hear about my health? I don't feel particularly ill, but I am in my mid-sixties; my bed is my boat across these final years. My knees and back give me a lot of pain. I have haemorrhoids, an ulcer and cataracts. When I eat, it's not unusual for me to spit out bits of tooth as I go. My ears seem to lose focus as the day goes on and people have to yell into me. I don't go to parties because I don't like to stand up. If I sit down, it makes it difficult for others to speak to me. Not that I am always interested in what they have to say; and if I'm bored, I don't want to hang around, which might make me seem abrupt or arrogant. (p. 3)

Ageing seems to be commonly considered "a matter of biology, best defined by an increasing risk of irremediable physical disability and death"[247] and as far as the body is concerned, it is usually understood as "an inexorable decline, involving shrinking, atrophy and a loss of mental capacity".[248] Of course, it seems impossible to deny that each biological lifespan is limited in its duration, and that ageing appears to be a matter-of-fact, physical discourse, connected to the possibility of prolonging one's life. However, just like the discourse on disability that was developed in the previous chapters, ageing is a socially-constructed phenomenon too: as time goes by, not only do people care and worry about the physical changes their bodies undergo to, which inevitably bring about an increasingly chance of aches and pains, but they are all too aware of the social stigma traditionally connected to old people, who are commonly perceived as support-demanding and in constant need of attention. In short, "faced with the physicality of old age – the changes in appearance and function that are seen socially as defining adult ageing – it seems impossible to argue that ageing can be understood as rooted not in the domain of biology but in social relation".[249] Indeed, it has often been pointed out that ageing can actually be considered a state of disability that all humans eventually acquire at some point in their lives; of course, people try not to think about that, and this might be the reason why ageing and death seem to have become taboos in our contemporary Western society.

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[247] C. Gilleard, P. Higgs (2005), "Ageing and its Embodiment". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.) (2005), *The Body: A Reader*, cit., p. 117.

[248] E. Barry (2015), "The Ageing Body". In D. Hillman, U. Maude (eds.) (2015), *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 132-148, p. 132.

[249] *Idem*, pp. 117-118.

However, this social silence cannot be considered an effective solution to the alleged unacceptability of a natural stage of human life that the majority of people will experience; in fact, in their book *Cultures of Ageing: Self, Citizen and the Body*, Chris Gilleard and Paul Higgs have explained how ageism, which is the development of stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination against people on the basis of their age, has "economic, psychological and social effects that potentially impact the physical well-being of retired people"[250] and this indeed seems to be the case of Kureishi's character, who, as time goes by, gradually sees his body deteriorating and starts losing his self-esteem too:

> It was a while ago, during my early fifties, that I began to lose my physical vanity, such as it was. I've been told that as a young man I was attractive to some people; I spent more time combing my hair than I did doing equations. Certainly I took it for granted that, at least, people wouldn't be repelled by my appearance. As a child, I lived among open fields and streams, and ran and explored all day. For the past few years, however, I have been plump and bald; my heart condition has given me a continuously damp upper lip. By forty I was faced with the dilemma of whether my belt should go over or under my stomach. Before my children advised me against it, I became, for a while, one of those men whose trousers went up to their chest. (p. 29)

The narrator's self derision, mingled with a certain feeling of bitterness, immediately warns the readers that they are about to dive into Adam's personal account of the horrors of ageing. With the distinctive irony and sense of humour that characterizes his literary production, Hanif Kureishi tackles the issue of loss of physical agility and sexual appeal that characterizes the approaching of the 'third age', as well as the alleged loss of value that, as I have mentioned, is the perceived social consequence people of all ages fear for their future. In fact, youth too is affected "by the cultural one-sidedness which reprises old age"[251] and many young people feel compelled to resort to a series of procedures to try and delay the threat of ageing, for the reasons that I am going to analyse in the next few pages.

Among the scholars who have investigated these questions, I have found particularly interesting the analysis developed by Italian psychoanalyst Luigi Zoja regarding the ubiquitous *gerontophobia* that, according to him, characterizes our contemporary society: in his view, because of the fact that in primitive, underdeveloped

[250] *Idem*, p. 120.
[251] L. Zoja (1983), "Working Against Dorian Gray: Analysis and the Old". *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, 1983, 28, pp. 51-64, p. 62.

societies reaching old age was a matter of luck (the exception rather than the rule), the old used to be relatively few in number and were granted social value, since they were normally entrusted the transmission of culture; in an age characterized by the total absence of mass media or even books, the importance of becoming old was particularly stressed, as they were the "guardians and transmitters of wisdom, traditions and collectively accepted values".[252] Thanks to the dramatic advancements in the fields of medicine, nutrition and hygiene that took place in the last few centuries, modernization has obviously brought about a growth in the number of people who reach old age, making this a reasonable expectation, but to the detriment of their social value: for the first time in history, our century has expropriated the traditional roles of the old, because "by inventing retirement it has taken away most of their socio-economic role, and by inventing the mass media and mass culture it has dispossessed them of their psychological, truly archetypal role".[253] A clear consequence of this is a psychological self-devaluation on the part of the old too, because if in earlier times they knew that they concentrated many collectively recognized values in themselves – and this was obviously a source of pride and social value – now the mass media convince them that they are, in fact, "the prototype of the loss of accepted value".[254] Mass media and advertising campaigns, typical features of consumeristic societies, have given rise to modern prejudices connected with old age, which is generally viewed as a state of malady characterized by "deficiency of youth".[255] As a consequence of this, youth is traditionally seen as the embodiment of value, while old age is burdened with non-value; Zoja claims that:

> In our society old age is statistically present as never before, while psychologically it is tending to disappear. Current values, which are reflected in the mass media and advertising, have rendered our society both hypomanic and 'juvenilistic'. One has only to turn on the radio or television to notice that 'Mr Average' advertised and appealed to has to be terribly extrovert, active and healthy - in a word, he is basically young. According to the advertisement he needs a lot of goods, but goods can be substitutes for individuation and belong to the world of youth; a car or liquor, for instance, are sold to you because you are young and they make you feel young. If the advertisements or the media do address themselves to the older person, it is precisely in order to ask him to disown his age, and if he wants to remain a client - and he usually does or he will be lost to society - he must betray and repress his archetypal

[252] *Idem*, p. 52.
[253] *Ibidem*.
[254] *Idem*, p. 62.
[255] *Idem*, p. 53.

reality.[256]

Before further exploring the role of mass-media in the development of *gerontophobia* and its consequences on the youth, I think it is worth to point to the fact that, along with the perception of ageing as a taboo in the contemporary society, death has become an intolerable topic too: it is now considered bad taste to speak about these themes, and the fact that people should feel ashamed of talking about death seems to point to the fact that they should feel ashamed of having to die too. According to Zoja, in earlier times not only was death considered an everyday topic but, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, death used to be a major public event that children of every age were brought to witness, because it was felt that "through death they could learn about life":[257] not only was the old person believed to possess wisdom, but with the approach of death this was perceived to reach its climax; therefore, the words uttered by an old person about to die were considered to contain teachings for everybody, thus emphasizing not only the prestigious role of old people in that kind of society, but also the importance of death as a natural stage in everyone's life cycle, and especially the importance to speak about it in order to gradually prepare for one's final moment: "[s]udden, unexpected death was traditionally a most dreaded occurrence, a dread still reflected in popular beliefs about restless ghosts haunting their place of death. These people are usually supposed to have died young or suddenly - more especially to have been murdered - and, their preparation for death not having been completed, they are unable to die completely".[258] And if in earlier times the old person was to eventually become the representative of a wisdom "freed from the burden of petty daily needs",[259] now they are forced to give up their autonomy and take the role of the patient, a passive object of medicine and technology. Nowadays, geriatricians seem to have taken on and to have been entrusted with the task of fighting death by constantly delaying it (even though there seems to be no such thing as dying of old age, because no matter how much and for how long one's body is fixed, mended and taken care of, biological bodies are eventually bound to perish) and hospices and hospitals tend to transform death into "the most collective and anonymous episode of life"[260]: both doctors and relatives usually prefer to hide a patient's imminent death from

[256] *Idem*, p. 59.
[257] *Idem*, p. 60.
[258] *Idem*, p. 58.
[259] *Ibidem.*
[260] *Idem*, p. 59.

them, and they do this on "the 'psychological' ground that the lie has a placebo effect and can help the patient to some sort of recovery",[261] but, in doing so, they prevent them the chance to prepare for the most natural of all events. Indeed, if there is anything that defines humans, it is the knowledge of one's own mortality, because "[a]lthough (other) animals, too, are mortal, at least they don't know that they are. They don't have to worry about it. We, on the other hand, worry about death constantly".[262]

These seem to be the reasons why taboos connected with ageing and death pervade our society, instilling in young people a premature anxiety for an event that is perceived as shameful and, consequently, propelling them to look for ways to delay (but also stop and, in their wildest hopes, rewind) the ageing process, or at least its superficial effects on the body. Arthur Kleinman claims that "[a]fter muscular and lithe youth and the robustness of early middle age pass, we move down the long slope of decline at the bottom of which death awaits us. Aging has become a disease in the contemporary West".[263] This seems to be the truth, and many people seem to be willing to do anything within their means to conserve and prolong their (appearance of) youth as long as possible, in the hope to preserve also the social "values" traditionally associated to (and promoted as distinguishing) youth. This is seen as the age of endless pleasures and possibilities in terms of ambition, relationships and even sex - which is something traditionally linked with youth, even though many studies have shown that sexuality knows no age limit, and that it is cultural prejudice that makes old people give up their sex life because it is something that is commonly perceived as offensive for our aesthetic taste.[264] As a consequence of this, the process of ageing is made to be perceived as an unfair deprivation of life possibilities and, seen in this light, it seems reasonable that many are unwilling to accept their defeat. Among them there is Adam, the protagonist of Kureishi's novella, who admits that:

> When I first became aware of my deterioration, having had it pointed out by a disappointed lover, I dyed my hair and even signed on at a gym. Soon I was so hungry I ate even fruit. It didn't take me long to realise there are few things more risible than middle-aged narcissism. I knew the game was up when I had to wear my reading glasses in order to see the magazine I was masturbating

[261] *Idem*, p. 58.
[262] M. Hauskeller (2015), "'Life's a Bitch, and then You Don't Die': Postmortality in Film and Television". In M. Hauskeller, T. D. Philbeck, C. D. Carbonell (eds.) (2015), *The Palgrave Handbook of Posthumanism in Film and Television*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 205-213, p. 205.
[263] A. Kleinman (2005), "Hypochondrias: The Ironic Disease". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.) (2005), *The Body: A Reader*, cit., pp. 219-229, p. 227.
[264] L. Zoja (1983), *op. cit*., p. 55.

over. (p. 29)

It seems possible to assert that, if "aging has become a disease" in our society, youth (or, at least, a youthful look) has become a fetish of our times, something which is idealized and, consequently, aptly commodified. However, Slater points out that "although the ideal body may always be young, the young body is not always ideal":[265] although they do exist in real life, not only old bodies, but also disabled and disfigured young bodies that fall out of traditional standards of beauty are often neglected by the mass media, an industry that instead grounds most advertising campaigns on the fashion model's body, that not only is young, but traditionally embodies health and beauty; these are the actual "values" inscribed in the young body, with the direct consequence that "the pervasiveness of media idealized body images have allowed the unattainable to become a normal standard of acceptable beauty".[266] Media seem to be the main cause of bodily unhappiness in our society, conveying a series of beauty stereotypes that burden even 'able', standard-size people with self-doubt: most ordinary people are, in fact, much larger that most fashion models, yet "models, as the noun implies, represent a collective value in the sense that they set a dominant standard for how women 'ought to be'".[267] As a consequence of this, "[s]uch images of 'perfection' lead us to falsely believe that hairless legs and flat stomachs are both 'natural' and 'normal', and place an expectation on women to comply with these perceived norms".[268] In fact, it seems undeniable that women have been for a long time the main target of beauty campaigns, although in the last few year men have started to be increasingly targeted and, as the protagonist of Kureishi's novella shows, made self-conscious about their ageing bodies too.

> [A]lthough having a 'youthful' body is ideal, when used in this way, the terms 'young' and 'youthful' represent something very different to the lived-experiences of chronologically 'young' people, and contradictory to other discourses of youth. When considering those chronologically young the emphasis is on temporality: youth is the period after childhood and prior to adulthood; a time of disruption, risk and rebellion; a time of laziness and apathy; a time it is desirable to 'grow out of' by meeting pedestalled adulthood signifiers. Youth and time are intrinsically, yet incongruously linked: whereas, on the one hand, we want to assist young people in their risky transition to adulthood (the sooner they can reach it the better), there is also a desire to

[265] J. Slater, (2012), "Youth for Sale: Using Critical Disability Perspectives to Examine the Embodiment of Youth". *Societies*, 2012, 2(3), pp. 195-209, p. 201.
[266] *Idem*, p. 198.
[267] M. Fraser, M. Greco (2005), "Introduction". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.) (2005), *The Body: A Reader*, cit., p. 17.
[268] J. Slater (2012), *op. cit.,* p. 201.

> remain, as adults, forever young. Although when discussed *explicitly* youth is about transience, when discursively, perhaps *implicitly* used, youth is about the desire to pause time.[269]

Of course, since it is impossible to halt or reverse the flow of time, people try at least to find ways to overcome its effects on their bodies; in fact, new cosmetic surgery techniques are constantly being introduced on the market (Gilleard and Higgs mention chemical skin peels to rejuvenate the appearance of the skin, scleropathy, hair transplantation, facelifts and tucks, forehead lifts and blepharoplasty, tummy tucks, botox injections and facial fat grafting, just to name some of the most popular[270]) and the fact that their costs are increasingly affordable are making them appealing to people of any age. This is to point out once again that it is not only people who already bear on their skins the marks of the ageing process that undergo this kind of practices, but an increasing number of people in their twenties and thirties seek anti-ageing procedures too, in an effort to retain what they already own and are not willing to let go. It is important to point out that cosmetic surgery and related procedures "do not 'restore' a youthful appearance so much as improve the 'aesthetic' appearance of the ageing face"[271] and this points to the fact that people feel an increasing urge to improve their natural appearance to conform to beauty standards – and once again, in contrast to what I have stated in the first chapter of this thesis in relation to disabled bodies, when referring to cosmetic surgery the adjective 'normal' appears to be used in a derogative way, in opposition to the artificially improved body. In the society Kureishi describes in his novella – which is, in fact, a typical Western society of the beginning of the 21st century – people are obsessed with their physical appearance:

> It was rare for my wife and her friends not to talk about botox and detox, about food and their body shape, size and relative fitness, and the sort of exercise they were or were not taking. I knew women, and not only actresses, who had squads of personal trainers, dieticians, nutritionists, yoga teachers, masseurs and beauticians labouring over their bodies daily, as if the mind's longing and anxiety could be cured via the body. (p. 29)

Here, the construction of a beautiful, well-kept body becomes a disciplining force bound by strong moral burdens, because "[a] fit body is defined as an energetic body, where energy is not only an instrument that the subject can exploit in daily life, but also an indicator of their (self-)worth".[272] Once again, the outer appearance becomes an indicator

[269] *Idem*, p. 202.
[270] C. Gilleard, P. Higgs (2005), "Ageing and its Embodiment", cit., pp. 118-119.
[271] *Idem*, p. 119.
[272] M. Fraser, M. Greco (2005), "Bodies in Consumer Culture". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.) (2005), *The*

of that person's moral value: just as a 'monstrous' body automatically defines a deviated, cursed mind (as it was the case in Mary Shelley's novel) a pleasant-looking body is an indicator of high commitment, self-determination and a whole other series of positive values connected to it:

> [The body's] omnipresence […] in advertising, fashion and mass culture; the hygienic, dietetic, therapeutic cult which surrounds it, the obsession with youth, elegance, virility/femininity, treatment and regimes, and the sacrificial practices attaching to it all bear witness to the fact that the body has today become an object of salvation. It has literally taken over the moral and ideological function from the soul.[273]

This is what Mike Featherstone identifies as the purpose of 'body maintenance', which can be understood as an instrumental strategy in a context where "self preservation depends upon the preservation of the body [and where] the body is the passport to all that is good in life. Health, youth, beauty, sex, fitness are the positive attribute which body care can achieve and preserve".[274] Of course, it is undeniable that opting for a healthy lifestyle that includes a balanced diet and fitness is something that everyone should aim to, as a 'natural' way to prevent disease and (ideally) extend one's lifespan; However, since the idea of body perfection is something which is imposed by the media, this can become an obsession towards the accomplishment of imposed beauty standards that, for some bodies, are simply unattainable, because they would require the exceeding of natural bodily "plasticity limits"[275]:

> Beauty has become an absolute, religious imperative. Being beautiful is no longer an effect of nature or a supplement to moral qualities. It is the basic, imperative quality of those who take the same care of their faces and their figures as they do of their souls. It is a sign, at the level of the body, that one is a member of the elect, just as success is a such a sign in business.[276]

And once this "absolute, religious imperative" has become an imposed necessity in order to (socially) survive in a society that values beauty and fitness as if they were moral values, people feel the need to resort to any kind of resource to tackle the problems inscribed in their bodies, to the point of accepting "invasive techniques like plastic surgery [instead

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Body: A Reader, cit., pp. 267-270, p. 268.

[273] J. Baudrillard (2005), "The Finest Consumer Object: The Body". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.) (2005), *The Body: A Reader*, cit., pp. 277-282, p. 277.

[274] M. Fraser, M. Greco (2005), "Introduction", in *op. cit.*, p. 28.

[275] R. Sassatelli (2005), "The Commercialization of Discipline: Keep-fit Culture and its Values". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.) (2005), *The Body: A Reader*, cit., pp. 283-287, p. 284.

[276] J. Baudrillard (2005), "The Finest Consumer Object: The Body", cit., p. 279.

of] exploiting its intrinsic capacity".[277] In "The Body", Kureishi takes this idea to the extreme; so much so that, in order to live again in a young and beautiful body, rich people are willing to undergo a 'cosmetic transplant', so to speak, and actually 'wear' a corpse. What Kureishi portrays is perhaps "the most striking image of amoral consumerism one could wish for";[278] In fact, the entrepreneurial spirit that Matte, the antagonistic *Newbody*, shows throughout the novella, prompts him to say that "[s]oon everyone'll be talking 'bout this. [...] Then there'll be shops where you go to buy the body you want. I'll open one myself with real bodies rather than mannequins in the window. Bingo! Who d'you want to be today!" (p. 96). In the dystopic (but possibly not too futuristic) society Kureishi describes, bodies come to have the same functions that clothes and accessories have now: they can be easily bought, sold, worn and discarded, and just like people today pick clothes from shops or their wardrobes and choose what to wear according to the kind of person they want to look like, in the novella bodies are something one can go shopping for:

> Suspended in harness, there were rows and rows of bodies: the pale, the dark and the in-between; the mottled, the clear-skinned, the hairy and the hairless, the bearded and the large-breasted; the tall, the broad and the squat. Each had a number in a plastic wallet above the head. Some looked awkward, as though they were asleep, with their heads lolling slightly to one side, their legs at different angles. Others looked as though they were about to go for a run. All the bodies, as far as I could see, were relatively young; some of them looked less like young adults than older children. The oldest were in their early forties. (pp. 23-24)

The show is obviously intimidating, and Adam is "reminded of the rows of suits in the tailors I'd visit as a boy with my father. Except these were not cloth covering but human bodies, born alive from between a woman's legs" (p. 24). However, the idea of a new start in really appalling, and he delves into this "warehouse of the lost" to choose the body he will spend his next six months into. Of course, he knows that this is not a choice to be taken lightly: not only is this a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but he also knows that he is going to choose the appearance that others will be seeing in the following months when looking at him, so he needs to choose carefully. It is interesting to notice that, being a worn-out artist in search of new inspiration for his work, Adam might decide to experience something completely different from what he is used to in terms of sex – "You might, for a change, want to come back as a young woman. […] Some men want to give

[277] R. Sassatelli (2005), *op. cit*., p. 284.
[278] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit., p. 101.

birth. Or they want to have sex as a woman" (p. 24) – or ethnicity – "you could choose a black body. [...] Think how much you'd learn about society and... all that" (p. 25) – but apparently this is not the kind of "new start" Adam is looking for. He eventually chooses the body that, according to him, is going to grant him the best possible range of enjoyable experiences in relation to the society he lives in and, although the choice might seem banal, he eventually opts for a facility that is "stocky and as classically handsome as any sculpture in the British Museum, he was neither white nor dark, but lightly toasted, with a fine, thick, penis and heavy balls. I would, at last, have the body of an Italian footballer: an aggressive, attacking midfielder, say. My face resembled that of the young Alain Delon with, naturally, my own brain leading this combination out to play for six months" (p. 25). And indeed, once he manages to try out his new purchase, he is overjoyed by the responses he receives by the *Oldbodies* that surround him:

> I was delighted with the compliments about my manner and appearance, loved being told I was handsome, beautiful, good-looking. I could see what Ralph meant by a new start with old equipment. I had intelligence, money, some maturity and physical energy. Wasn't this human perfection? Why hadn't anyone thought of putting them together before? (p. 56)

Adam seems to embody the ultimate transhumanist dream: that of an extended life reached thanks to technological applications on the biological body. Transhumanism is the branch of posthumanism that "pursue[s] a utopian vision of improving or perfecting the human species via life extension processes (millions of nanobots scouring disease from our bodies and improving our cognitive abilities), genetic enhancement, and biotechnological prostheses".[279] The purpose of transhumanism is human enhancement and, among the many ways in which this term can be interpreted, life and health extension have the highest priority in the transhumanist discourse. Of course, "if death is the worst that can happen to a person then it follows that no price can be too high to pay to avoid one's own death as long as possible and to achieve virtual immortality",[280] and in fact Adam willingly accepts to spend a considerable sum of money in order to undergo the procedure that will grant him more life:

> [The surgeon's] assistant ensured the paperwork was rapidly taken care of, and I wrote a cheque. It was for a considerable amount, money that would otherwise have gone to my children. I hoped scarcity would make them inventive and vital. My wife was already provided for. What was bothering

[279] A. Tarr, D. R. White (2018), "Introduction", cit., p. 13.
[280] M. Hauskeller (2015), *op. cit*., p. 205.

> me? I couldn't stop suspecting that this was a confidence trick, that I'd been made a fool of in my most vulnerable areas: my vanity and fear of decline and death. But if it was a hoax, it was a laboured one, and I would have parted with money to hear about it. (p. 21)

Money is indeed a crucial topic in the posthuman discourse, because the economic accessibility (or lack of it) to biotechnological advances may lead to the creation of a social hierarchy in which access to enhancement of human abilities could be a privilege held by the wealthy and powerful, while the less affluent would be relegated to a state of 'disadvantaged humanity': "If enhancement of human abilities becomes more available, the worry is that only the moneyed elite will have access, thus creating a hierarchy not just of possibilities and opportunities, but of actual humanness. Democracy becomes a sham if certain humans can become - or be born as - superior in intellect and physical ability". [281] This implies that human enhancement requires responsibility, because "possibilities of abusing biotechnology and thus creating a radical inequality that endangers liberal democracy and even the nature of the human species"[282] are at stake. This fear of an amoral exploitation of technology at the expense of those who cannot afford to access it is explored also in Kureishi's novella, when Ralph says that ill and disadvantaged people "can't get the help they need. Even in the long run they don't come around. Anti-depressants, therapy, all that, it never works. They're never going to be doers and getters like us, man. Better to be rid of them altogether and let the healthy ones live" (p. 47). In fact, this is the kind of dystopic turn that Kureishi envisions in his story: a future where the prolongation of the life of privileged and powerful people takes place at the cost of the lives of those who are marginalised and poor, those who cannot afford a posthuman future, because "Who wants a lot of Oldbodies hanging about the world? They're ugly and expensive to maintain. Soon, they'll be irrelevant" (p. 103). And since their lives are evaluated as worthless to be lived, the implication is that those bodies would better be used to host the brains of those who, instead, can afford to keep living: "Live in the bodies of the discarded, you mean? The neglected, the failures? […] I see what you're getting at" (p. 47). Although Kureishi envisions this kind of threat in his science-fiction text, the democratic use of technologies and other ways to reach human enhancement is an issue which is already being discussed within the posthuman discourse, although different views are currently advanced: Ferrando reports that in transhumanism

[281] A. Tarr, D. R. White (2018), "Introduction", cit., p. 12.
[282] *Idem*, p. 13.

distinctive currents coexist, among which there are Libertarian Transhumanism, that "advocates free market as the best guarantor of the right to human enhancement" and Democratic Transhumanism, that "calls for an equal access to technological enhancements, which could otherwise be limited to certain socio-political classes and related to economic power, consequently encoding racial and sexual politics".[283] In fact, it could be argued that the kind of attitude towards life-prolongation described by Kureishi is not very different from the attitude people currently show towards cosmetic practices:

> Cosmetic surgery is available only to a limited number of people. It is not funded within either taxation-based or insurance-based healthcare systems. There are still relatively few people whose lives create sufficient dissonance between their public and private selves that they would go so much out of their way to realize a wish to look younger. [However], that a significant minority of people - usually those with considerable material resources - do choose to have aesthetic surgery to rejuvenate their appearance shows what the many without those resources might also do had they similar opportunities.[284]

However, if cosmetic surgery aims to correct alleged flaws people feel like they can no longer live with, in order to improve what one already has, Adam's operation aims to give him what originally belonged to someone else; accepting to take part in the experiment, Adam defies mortality and, as a consequence, his own humanity too, and he is eventually bound to regret it: "Matte and I were both mutants, freaks, human unhumans – a fact that I could at least forget when I was with real people, those with death in them" (p. 102). In a society that has "replaced ethics with aesthetics" (p. 97), he buys his way into "an elite, a superclass of superbodies" (p. 96), but he eventually finds out that the renovated vigour of a youth body is not enough to make him happy, and would be willing to give anything in order to get his derelict, old body back. To conclude this chapter, I think that Katherine Hayles' words are appropriate. In her *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles generally expresses a positive, optimistic view of what will be our posthuman future (or rather, according to the title of her work, of what our posthuman present already is); she is aware of the fear of technology that is traditionally connected to science-fiction and dystopic literature, but she is confident that humans will eventually learn to accept death and, rather than keep trying to delete it, they will embrace it as an intrinsic component of their being humans:

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[283] F. Ferrando (2013), "Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Antihumanism, Metahumanism, and New Materialisms", cit., p. 27.
[284] C. Gilleard, P. Higgs (2005), "Ageing and its Embodiment", cit., p. 118.

> If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival.[285]

[285] K.N. Hayles (1999), *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, cit., p. 5.

CHAPTER 4 – METAMORPHIC BODIES AND UNCANNY SELVES

4.1 – VENTURING INTO SCIENCE FICTION: HANIF KUREISHI'S HOMAGE TO MARY SHELLEY

> The door opened and the surgeon came in.
> 'You look splendid.' He walked around me. 'Michelangelo has made David!'
> 'I was going to say Frankenstein has just -' (Kureishi, pp. 35-36)

In the next few pages I would like to further investigate the two texts that I have analysed in the previous chapters, as to identify a number of features that characterize both of them and that, in my view, connect two literary works written almost two centuries apart from one another. On a general level, it can be argued that they both describe the "birth" of two un-human creatures (indeed, Kureishi's Adam is fully identified as a human being by those surrounding him but, at least for the sake of this analysis, I think it is right to grant Frankenstein's unnamed "monster" a fellow specimen to be compared with), and they are both created in a laboratory by a male scientist who takes advantage of the latest technological advancements of his times. However, although the two male subjects that are given life share the same kind of unnatural origin, their adventures differ considerably in terms of social experiences that their new bodies provide them with, but which eventually lead both of them to the same kind of lonely epilogue; in short, these are two novels that, in different ways, show us that "our bodies [...] are both our enablers and our prisons".[286]

As I have claimed in the previous chapter, Hanif Kureishi's *The Body* represents a unique example in his literary production, in that it was the first time that the writer put aside his traditional realist style to embrace science fiction as a new narrative strategy. However, the literary purpose of this choice remains the writer's typical desire to explore his characters' wishes and aspirations and, in fact, the introspective approach that he manages to carry out in the text does not differ from what he employs in his other novels and short stories. In an interview with Bradley Buchanan, Kureishi claimed that:

> I think all my characters try to enlarge their sense of self, struggling against constraint. [...] They're trying to find out who else they may be, or who else might be inside them, or what identifications with other groups are possible to enlarge the sense of self. Most of my characters […] are pretty restless. […] So what I'm interested in is 'Who can I become?', What are the possibilities of

[286] J. Updike (2004), "Mind/Body Problems", cit..

life for me?[287]

This desire of transformation, that meets the groundbreaking possibilities offered by science and technology, is in fact at the centre of Kureishi's 2002 novella. The writer has claimed more than once that one of the main sources of inspiration for his literary style come from the reading of "the real thing",[288] the novels that have shaped the Western literary canon, among which he places the "British fantastic tradition"[289] of Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* and, of course, Shelley's *Frankenstein*. These authors are some of his models and in their works he especially appreciates "the wild implausibility, boldness and brilliance of the artist's idea or metaphor rather than the arrangement of paragraphs".[290] Therefore, it seems reasonable to propose that, in writing his very first story that makes use of science fiction as a literary strategy, Kureishi might have drawn inspiration from – and possibly also wanted to pay homage to – the author of the novel which is commonly assumed to be science fiction's foundational text, namely Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*.

It might be argued that the two stories do not, in fact, involve the same kind of surgical procedure at the centre of their plots: although both creatures are born out of an assemblage of different body parts, the crucial point in Kureishi's narrative is the transfer of a living and perfectly-functioning brain into a deceased body, while the main theme in Shelley's novel is the "bestowing [of] animation upon lifeless matter" (Shelley, p. 50). In fact, the origin of Frankenstein's creature's brain is never really mentioned and, although it can be assumed that what the scientist employs is a human brain – since the mode of thinking and the feelings the creature develops throughout his life are typically human –, Shelley never refers to it in her text. Frankenstein admits that he "dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave", that he "collected bones from charnel houses", and that the "dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of [his] materials" (Shelley, p. 53), but Shelley's original narrative "includes no nightly forays into cemeteries or morgues, no organ removal from corpses, no stitching together of bodily parts, no scars on the creature's skin, not even a hint of the brain's significance for the creature's identity".[291] However, as I have argued in chapter two, the popular narrative that is

[287] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit., p. 112.
[288] H. Kureishi (2015), "Anarchy and the Imagination". In H. Kureishi (2015) *Love+Hate*, cit., p. 21.
[289] T. Glencross (2003), "Interview With Hanif Kureishi", *The Lip*. Available from: http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=121&page=1 [Last accessed on March 1, 2020]
[290] H. Kureishi (2015), "Anarchy and the Imagination", cit., pp. 21-22.
[291] F. Vidal (2016), "Frankenstein's Brain: 'The Final Touch'". *SubStance*, Volume 45, Number 2, 2016

connected with the 'Frankenstein's myth' in the 21st century differs considerably from the original novel: nowadays, a typical trait that is popularly connected with the "monster's" appearance is a jugged, big scar that runs across his forehead, furnished with rough, prominent stitches or metal clamps, and sometimes these appear to be the only evident signs that a surgery has been performed on the creature's body. According to Fernando Vidal, this is due to the fact that the many film adaptations that have stemmed from Shelley's novel since the onset of cinematography have contributed to shape a representation of the creature's body (as well as his personality) that is far from what the author originally described. In his article *Frankenstein's Brain: "The Final Touch",* Vidal contends that, since the renowned 1931 movie by James Whale, Frankenstein movies gradually "abandon the original theme of the creation of life and place a brain transplantation subplot at the core of their narrative":[292] in Whale's movie, a pivotal scene is the mistaken implant in the monster's body of a brain which is labelled as "dysfunctional" in place of a normal one and, from that moment on, in the many other Frankenstein films that included a "brain subplot", this was the feature that more than any other provided the cause for the creature's monstrous instincts: although, as I have previously stated, Shelley blames the parental negligence on the part of Frankenstein, as well as the repeated social rejection the creature is subjected to as the causes of his turn to monstrosity, in many movie adaptations of the novel these tend to be overshadowed by the mistaken implant of an inherently-evil criminal brain whose "biological criminality and lack of speech sentence [the monster] to a life of guilt, condemnation, and social impotence".[293] Unfortunately, Vidal also noticed how the theme of brain transplantation, instead of being used to explore the themes of personhood, identity and the ethical stances connected to transplants, has "mostly served entertainment purposes by way of violence and occasionally comedy",[294] often displaying increasing amounts of violence, blood and gore as a way to exploit the commercial appeal that the horror genre has gained, especially from the 1960s onward. In his view, the 'brain-transplant subplot' has become a persistent theme in the entertainment industry, which has been especially propelled by the groundbreaking scientific advancements of the last few decades. In fact, to the present day no full-body human transplant has been performed yet, but Vidal reports that in 1999

(Issue 140), pp. 88-117, p. 94.

[292] *Idem*, p. 89.

[293] C. J. S. Picart, "The Cinematic Rebirths of Frankenstein: Universal, Hammer, and Beyond", p. 31. Quoted in F. Vidal (2016) "Frankenstein's Brain: 'The Final Touch'", cit., p. 98.

[294] F. Vidal (2016) "Frankenstein's Brain: 'The Final Touch'", cit., p. 110.

the American surgeon Robert J. White (who in the 1970s had transplanted the head of a monkey onto the body of another) predicted that the "Frankenstein legend", ultimately including brain transplantation, "will become a clinical reality early in the 21st century".[295] Indeed, this seems to be something Hanif Kureishi agrees with, because in his novella he has his protagonist say that "[i]t seems logical that technology and medical capability only need to catch up with the human imagination or will. I know nothing about science, but isn't this usually the way?" (Kureishi, p. 12). In fact, as it has often been pointed out, it is true that literary works, as well as movies,

> are always cultural documents and bear traces of contents, structures and events that exist off-screen; one way or another, they articulate values, beliefs and concerns that subsist without them. They can therefore be approached as the expression and elaboration of issues circulating in the world […]. More importantly, since they are themselves part of the contexts they supposedly 'reflect', they must be considered as active agents in structuring them.[296]

This proposition suggests a mutual influence between fictional works and scientific advancement, and even though neither Shelley or Kureishi have devoted their life to science, it is known that Mary Shelley was exposed to debates and exhibitions of the latest scientific discoveries of her time prior to the writing of her *Frankenstein*, and it is possible to suppose that, being Kureishi a man of the 21st century, when information circulates non-stop throughout the media and the web, he too is exposed to the contemporary scientific and technological advancements, and might be drawn to question himself about their implications.

It has also been noticed that the popularity of *Frankenstein* has well survived to this day because "there is the tendency to read today's concerns back into the novel, to take its 'message' about 'obsessive scientific pursuit' for granted as a prefiguring of science's often dangerous advances in the twentieth century".[297] However, just like it has been argued that the lack of scientific details Kureishi provides weakens the identification of his novel as science fiction, some reviewers have criticized Shelley's novel for the same reason, claiming that she "skips the science in her account of the creature's animation".[298] Of course, this seems to be a tenuous criticism, because in writing their texts neither

[295] R. J. White (1999), *Head Transplants*, p. 24. Quoted in F. Vidal (2016), "Frankenstein's Brain: 'The Final Touch'", cit., p. 111.
[296] F. Vidal (2016), "Frankenstein's Brain: 'The Final Touch'", cit., pp. 91-92.
[297] M. Hindle (1990), "Vital Matters: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Romantic Science". *Critical Survey*, 2:1 (1990), pp. 29-35, pp. 29-30.
[298] *Idem*, p. 30.

Shelley or Kureishi aimed to provide their readers with a detailed scientific lecture on the surgeries they included in their works: although the scenes in which they give life to their creatures are to be considered among the most pivotal ones in their narrations, those are not the climax events that conclude their novels, but rather the very beginning of the action. Science was simply the pretext that helped to spark the visionary gaze of the two authors, who used their fiction in order to speculate on the possible consequences of what they saw was happening around them, especially in terms of the scientific and technological innovations that were being developed around the time they wrote their fiction. It is true that, in both cases, the consequences they envision are generally negative, but the two texts are not meant to be taken as a certain prediction, but rather as a warning, a cautionary tale, because science fiction offers its readers the tools for reimagining the world they live in – and themselves too – providing glimpses of how things might be otherwise in "alternative scenarios that create an effect of estrangement, defamiliarizing existing reality, and making the reader aware of his provisional quality, its potential to be radically changed".[299] In fact, in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway claimed that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion",[300] highlighting the multiple connections between the literary genre and the posthuman reality that contemporary developed countries are moving towards. Critics of the posthuman claim that people will necessarily need to reconfigure the way they conceive relationships and subjectivities, and the speculative frames that science fiction offers may help readers to come to terms with these changes, because "[b]eyond obvious connections to technological posthumanism, SF has long imaged subjectivities beyond the human, value systems premised on systems other than humanism, and the expansion of agency and ethics to non-human actors [...] whose sentience is either raised by technology or newly recognised by non-anthropocentric culture".[301] Science fiction can therefore make its readers reflect upon the possibility that the human is only one among countless species, the reality they live in only one possible among many, and their history only a fragment of the history of the whole universe, offering them "a possible escape velocity that can sweep readers out of their spacetime continuum, warping their minds into a cognitive

[299] C. Ferns (2011), "Utopia, Anti-Utopia and Science Fiction". In A. Sawyer, P. Wright (eds), *Teaching Science Fiction. Teachnig the New English*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 55-71, p. 56.
[300] D. Haraway (1991), *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, cit., p. 149.
[301] S. Vint (2016), "Science Fiction and Posthumanism". Available from: http://criticalposthumanism.net/science-fiction/ [Last accessed on March 1, 2020]

zone from which they might look back at their own social moment, perhaps with anxiety or better with anger, and then discover that such a place might be known for what it is and changed for the better".[302] Indeed, just like Donna Haraway proposed in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, "SF is occupied in overcoming notions of binary oppositions, between norm and deviation […], concentrating its imaginary in the perception and evaluation of the technosciences and of the manipulation of living form whether they carry the negative meaning of doom or the positive meaning of promise".[303] As I have highlighted in the first chapter, the human–technology assemblage that Haraway referred to when she took the cyborg as the central figure of her thinking was meant to be provocative, but not exclusive: even though the idea of mingling organic bodies with computer circuits is the first image that comes to most people's minds when they hear somebody talking about cyborgs, this is only one of the many possible figurations of the posthuman, and that does not exclude human-animal – or even human-human – assemblages. In Shelley's and Kureishi's novels readers are presented with two examples of creatures that comprise both: they are human, animal, and technological at the same time, because although no prosthetic piece of technology is included in their bodies, it is thanks to science that they are born.

I would like now to momentarily put aside the posthuman implications of the two texts, in order to concentrate on a few peculiar similarities and divergences between them. Of course, the two novels were written in different historical periods by two authors who experienced dissimilar social experiences, but in my view it could be easily argued that what Kureishi aimed to do when he published *The Body* was to stage a 21st century re-writing of Shelley's classic. The first connection that I think is plausible to make is that they both seem to be 'visual' novels: not only because both authors provide their readers with extensive descriptions of the places where their characters' adventures take place, as a way to fully immerse them in the narration, but also for the fact that in both texts the creatures' eyes and the sense of vision in general are given preeminence. In both narratives, eyes are conceived as the first and most direct way by which one experiences the world; apparently, the authors want to assert that sight is the most immediate of our senses, the one that before any other is used as a mode of appraisal, evaluation and judgement of the

[302] T. Moylan (2000), *Scraps of the Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia*, Boulder: Westview, p. 30. Quoted in C. Ferns (2011), "Utopia, Anti-Utopia and Science Fiction", cit., p. 57.

[303] A. F. Cascais (2013), "The Metamorphic Body in Science-Fiction: From Prosthetic Correction to Utopian Enhancement". In K. Allan (ed) (2013), *Disability in Science Fiction: Representatios of Technology as Cure*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 61-72, p. 65.

world surrounding the subject, but also that, as a consequence of this, vision is the sense that can be most easily tricked, and that the evaluations that come out of it can be biased. In my view, this seems to be plausible in that the characters' eyes are a central feature that both authors pay attention to during the process of body selection, life-creation and birth of their creatures; Jay Clayton noticed that "[i]n Shelley's novel, disembodied eyes terrify Frankenstein repeatedly. Indeed, eyes seem to hold a special place among the bodily organs the novel assembles":[304] from the very first moment that Frankenstein sees "the dull yellow eye of the creature open" on his operating table, he is repelled by this feature, because the "watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set" (Shelley, p. 55) terrify and upset him. That same night, when the creature starts exploring the world where he has been delivered and visits Frankenstein's bedroom, what upsets the creator is the fact that the creature's "eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me" (Shelley, p. 56). Moreover, Frankenstein is repeatedly hunted by a vision of eyes constantly watching him wherever he goes: "I saw around me nothing but a dense and frightful darkness, penetrated by no light but the glimmer of two eyes that glared upon me" (Shelley, p. 181). In the same way, they represent a central feature in the body-selection process that Kureishi's Adam carries out before his operation: not only does the nurse insist that he takes a look at his new facility's eyes before he agrees to purchase it but, but when he is examining his new body in the mirror (a process that will be further analysed in the next few pages), he acknowledges that "[t]he nurse had asked me to examine my eyes. I saw what she meant. There was a softness in me, a wistfulness; I detected a yearning, or even something tragic, in the eyes" (Kureishi, p. 35). Throughout the novella, they are also the bodily feature that Adam uses to detect other people's appreciation of his seductive body when he notices that, looking at him, "[their] eyes were glazed with desire" (Kureishi, p. 80). However, in my view both authors seem to believe that eyes are also easy to deceive: as I have claimed before, in both novels all the characters are easily misled by the creatures' physical appearance, which is assumed to be a valid system to judge their personality too. For this reason, while Frankenstein's creature is considered a wretch, a fiend, and a horrid monster because of his disfigured appearance, Adam's body is the symbol of perfection, "a pure fashion item which didn't require elaboration" (Kureishi, p. 86), that not only is pleasing to see, but has direct effects

[304] J. Clayton (2003), "Frankenstein's Futurity: Replicants and Robots". In E. Schor (ed) (2003), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., pp. 84-102, p. 89.

on others: people fall in love with him, they are willing to pay in order to spend more time near his body, they want Adam as an accessory to show off (and this also points to the fact that they see him as a handsome, brainless toy-boy, bringing about further prejudices connected with physical appearance) but people are also jealous of him, because apparently he is "someone who had everything, and a future too. There was nothing I couldn't do or be […]. They hated it and wanted it" (Kureishi, p. 79). In both stories, the creatures eventually end up suffering because of these visual assumptions: whether people want to look at them, or on the contrary refuse to do so, they both realize and acknowledge that their outer appearance does not match with their true, internal self, which is something that people cannot see with their eyes – and in fact it is not a case that old De Lacey's blindness is a blessing for Frankenstein's creature, who, for once in his lifetime, has the chance to feel listened to and to reclaim his non-monstrosity.

Moreover, I would suggest that in both novels visual images are constantly following the characters, even when their eyes are closed; in fact, a special kind of 'vision' that can be taken into account is the recurrent presence of dreams and nightmares that hunt them at night, when they are most vulnerable. In the case of *Frankenstein* this is not surprising: Mary Shelley herself, in her introduction to the 1931 edition of the novel, informed the readers that the idea for her book occurred to her during a sleepless night, when "[m]y imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie".[305] In a sort of waking dream, the gist of *Frankenstein*'s plot took life in front of her eyes:

> 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, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half-vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handiwork, horrorstricken.[306]

Therefore, it is not surprising that dreams, and not necessarily pleasant ones, play an important role in the development of her novel[307]; dreams belong to those psychic states "where the ego relinquishes its leading role and makes way for unconscious content",[308]

[305] M. Shelley (1831), "Author's Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition". In M. Shelley (2008), *Frankenstein*, cit., p. 6.
[306] *Idem*, p. 6.
[307] See J. Glance (1996), "'Beyond the Usual Bounds of Reverie?' Another Look at the Dreams in *Frankenstein*". *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 7.4 (1996): 30-47.
[308] L. Zoja (1983), "Working Against Dorian Gray: Analysis and the Old", cit., p. 62.

and in Shelley's novel there are at least three of these episodes that it is possible to identify. The first dream that appears in her story is the one Victor has right after his experiments succeeds; after fleeing at the sight of his monstrous creature, he runs to his room and falls asleep, but he is “disturbed by the wildest dreams”:

> I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her, but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. (Shelley, p. 56)

This dream can be considered as a sort of premonition of Elizabeth’s death, which, in fact, will be caused by the creature who has just been given life, and whose sight provoked in Frankenstein the deep state of anxiety that led to this nightmare. The second dream Shelley describes is the one that follows the creature’s approach to and attempted meeting with the De Lacey’s family: “The horrible scene of the preceding day was forever acting before my eyes; the females were flying and the enraged Felix tearing me from his father's feet” (Shelley p. 137). After the creature is rejected once again by the human society, and particularly after this attempt – on which he had placed all his hopes – fails, the creature’s dream gives voice to the inner struggle that seizes him: in the dream (which is actually a recollection of past events), the creature witnesses once again the deprivation of female affection and fatherly love, which are both things he strives for throughout the novel and that are violently torn away from him by Felix, who in the dream takes the place of Victor. The third dream described in the novel is both a partial premonition of later events, namely Victor Frankenstein’s death at the end of the novel, and an account of his inner state at the moment of the dream: “I felt the fiend's grasp in my neck and could not free myself from it; groans and cries rang in my ears” (Shelley, p. 183). In fact, Victor is not suffocated by his creation in the epilogue but, although indirectly, it is the creature that causes his death. Instead, what Victor witnesses in his dream is an account of the last moments of life of both his little brother William and his friend Clerval, and since he is aware that it was the creature he had given life to that strangled both of them, it seems plausible that Frankenstein feels responsible for their death. In a similar way, dreams, visions and nightmares have the same kind of function also in Kureishi's novella: the first dream that Adam has, while he is still recovering from the operation, is set in a railway station: “In the dream, when I arrived at the station, everyone wanted to meet me; they

crowded around me, shaking my hand, touching, kissing and stroking me in congratulation" (Kureishi, p. 31). Since in his *Oldbody* Adam lamented that "[t]he older and sicker you get, the less your body is a fashion item, the less people want to touch you" (Kureishi, p. 34), this dream might be a hopeful anticipation of what he expects his new purchase will bring him: he has just embarked on his journey (hence the train station) and he predicts that in his new 'facility' many more people will want to surround him in order to be close to his body, and he anticipates the pleasure of being noticed, cherished and desired. Later on, he meets Patricia, the owner of the spiritual centre where he spends most of his adventures as a *Newbody*. Patricia regularly holds "dream workshops" that are particularly popular among the guests, during which they free-associate and provide interpretations of their night visions. Adam accepts to participate, but he is soon forced to run away, because the emotional load this experience raises in him is too much to stand – and in fact the the protagonist ironically remarks that Patricia's classes "were known more for the quantity of tears shed than for the quality of wisdom transmitted" (Kureishi, p. 70). Adam's dreams are obviously connected to the experiences he is living in his new body and, just like in Shelley's novel, they anticipate part of the future actions:

> I was to see my dead parents again, for a final conversation. When I met them – and they had their heads joined together at one ear, making one interrogative head – they failed to recognise me. I tried to explain how I had come to look different, but they were outraged by my claims to be myself. They turned away and walked into eternity before I could convince them – as if I ever could – of who I really was. (Kureishi, p. 72)

Indeed, this seem to be an anticipation of the epilogue, in which Adam is stuck in a body that belongs to him just because he has paid for it, but that does not reflect who he really is and that forces him into a state of lonely isolation, in which he feels that he cannot either go back to his old life or move on as to start a new life all over again; indeed, he comes to feel condemned to eternal "unrecognisability", since he cannot retrieve the affection of the people who met him and loved him in his old body. The third dream he has is connected to the surgery too, and it is the most anxiety-provoking, as well as the one in which Adam admits for the first time to be regretting his choice, because he dreams of

> a man in a white coat with a human brain in his hands, crossing a room between two bodies, each with its skull split open, on little hinges. As he carried the already rotting brain, it dripped. Bits of memory, desire, hope and love, encased in skin-like piping, fell onto the sawdust floor where hungry

> dogs and cats lapped them up. (Kureishi, p. 72)

Adam feels that, when he willingly agreed to undergo the surgery, he implicitly accepted to lose part of himself, his original essence. Accepting to let go of his decaying body, he assumed that he could bring with him the most important part of his self, and that what was contained in his brain was enough to recover his essence in his new facility. However, he overlooked the risk that he was letting go of his "embodied knowledge" as well, and he is eventually forced to acknowledge that "my old body and its suffering stood for the life I had made, the sum total of my achievement made flesh" (Kureishi, p. 62); when the animals in the dream devour the most intimate parts of his old self, he starts to acknowledge the risk that he might have forfeited his old life forever, and that going back might not be an option anymore. It is worth noting that the three characters who recall their dreams are all in such a peculiar state that they cannot confide their own secrets to anyone else but the readers: whether their loneliness is self-inflicted or imposed by others, they have no chance to unload the burden they feel within themselves, and the readers become their only confidents and listeners.

Indeed, loneliness and isolation are the feelings that linger on both texts, and I would like to point out how both authors give relevance to the name 'Adam', the name of the man who, according to the Bible, inhabited alone the Garden of Eden until God provided him with a companion to relieve his solitude. In *Frankenstein*, commentators argued that Mary Shelley provides a re-writing of the story narrated in the Genesis, "albeit mediated through John Milton's Paradise Lost, and Victor's scientific ambition to undo death and disease, the effects of the Fall, through his man made Adam and Eve".[309] In fact, the creature admits that:

> Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me. (Shelley, p. 129)

The creature is portrayed as "a forsaken Adam whose tragedy we are to pity"[310] and Victor,

[309] M. Mulvey-Roberts (2018), "Monstrous Dissections and Surgery as Performance: Gender, Race and *The Bride of Frankenstein*". In C. Davidson, M. Mulvey-Roberts (eds) (2018) *Global Frankenstein. Studies in Global Science Fiction*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 53-72, p. 60.

[310] B. G. Moreno, F. G. Moreno (2018), "Beyond the Filthy Form: Illustrating Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*".

in contrast, as an omnipotent but cruel and irresponsible creator, who sees himself as the father of a new species, but whose ambition overshadows the thought of what life will be like for that species. Moreover, the Creature's fall from grace is "poignantly played to express the isolation, liminality, and melancholy associated with his patchwork monstrosity and engineered creation"[311] and this seems to be the same destiny to which Kureishi's Adam is bound, when in the last sentence of the novella he claims that "I was a stranger on the earth, a nobody with nothing, belonging nowhere, a body alone, condemned to begin again, in the nightmare of eternal life" (Kureishi, p. 126); it has been noticed that the use of the words 'earth', 'condemned to begin' and 'eternal life' seem to be a direct reference to the story in the Genesis book: "Adam in the Bible was the first man on Earth, made of bones and flesh, destined to die; whereas [Kureishi's Adam] refuses to grow old and ends up immortal because he cannot recover his old body".[312] In the novella, the protagonist is posited as one of the first men in a new kind of society, he is "a walking laboratory, an experiment. [He is] beyond good and evil" (Kureishi, p. 40) but, in contrast to the first man described in the Bible, he has forsaken his innocence, his virtuousness and his nature to pursue his hedonistic yearning, and in doing so he has condemned himself to a lonely un-human existence for the eternity. In fact, none of the three men in the novels is relieved from his solitude by an Eve: Frankenstein denies his creature the pleasure of companionship when he refuses to comply with his request to make a female being, and the creature takes revenge on his creator by denying him the same love he feels he has been deprived of when he kills Elizabeth; Adam has a woman who loves him, but he realizes only too late that because of his actions he might have lost her forever.

Finally, I would like to point out two elements that stand out at the end of both novels, and that mark the last scenes in which the two creatures appear; these are the powerful element of fire and the action of escaping. Fire appears extensively throughout Shelley's novel and, in my view, it comes to symbolize both life and death: at the beginning of his narration, Victor Frankenstein explains that he was first made curious by nature when he beheld the power of a thunder that shredded a tree, turning it into ashes:

> I beheld a stream of fire issue from an old and beautiful oak which stood about

In C. Davidson, M. Mulvey-Roberts (eds) (2018) *Global Frankenstein. Studies in Global Science Fiction*, cit., pp. 227-244, p. 231.

[311] S. Rollins (2018), "The Frankenstein Meme: The Memetic Prominence of Mary Shelley's Creature in Anglo-American Visual and Material Cultures". In C. Davidson, M. Mulvey-Roberts (eds) (2018) *Global Frankenstein. Studies in Global Science Fiction*, cit., pp. 247-264, p. 258.

[312] L. Menard, (2008), "Fiche de Lecture: The Body, Hanif Kureishi", cit..

> twenty yards from our house; and so soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump. When we visited it the next morning, we found the tree shattered in a singular manner. It was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribbons of wood. I never beheld anything so utterly destroyed. (Shelley, p. 38)

The experience is both shocking and mind-blowing for young Victor, that from that moment on directs his whole attention to his studies of natural philosophy, that will eventually lead him to "infuse a spark of being" into lifeless matter and create life. Fire also means cosiness and better nourishment for the creature when he first discovers it, but, when he sticks his hand into the naked flame, he understands that fire can also bring about pain and destruction; and this is exactly what he wants to take advantage of when, in a thrust of destructive revenge, he wants to pay the De Lacey family back for having given him false hope for sympathy. Even though they have already run off, the creature decides to burn their house down, as to remove anything that is connected to them:

> I lighted the dry branch of a tree and danced with fury around the devoted cottage […] and I waved my brand; it sank, and with a loud scream I fired the straw, and heath, and bushes, which I had collected. The wind fanned the fire, and the cottage was quickly enveloped by the flames, which clung to it and licked it with their forked and destroying tongues. (Shelley, p. 139)

Finally, fire reappears in the promise of self-immolation that closes the novel: once he learns that his creator has died, the creature feels like there is no more purpose in his life, and announces Captain Walton and the readers that he is ready to commit suicide in a remote land among the ice of the Polar Circle. Although the reader does not witness this self-immolation, the creature's words are powerful and resolute: "I shall collect my funeral pile and consume to ashes this miserable frame, that its remains may afford no light to any curious and unhallowed wretch who would create such another as I have been. I shall die" (Shelley, p. 221). And he remarks his intentions once again right before jumping off Captain Walton's ship: "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 swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace, or if it thinks, it will not surely think thus. Farewell" (Shelley, p. 222). In the same way, fire is a powerful and ambivalent element also in Hanif Kureishi's novella: right after his operation, when he is still inebriated by the constant attention his new body grants him, fire is used as a metaphor of the ardour and passion that he feels are revived within himself: "[f]or the first time in years, my body felt sensual and full of intense yearning; I was inhabited by a

warm, inner fire, which nonetheless reached out to others – to anyone, almost. I had forgotten how inexorable and indiscriminate desire can be" (Kureishi, p. 48). But it is once again towards the end of the story that fire comes to represent death and destruction: expecting that Matte's henchmen will eventually hunt and catch him, Adam has to rely on the last valuable thing he owns, namely his new body, to grant himself a hope for salvation: "I didn't believe they'd shoot me. The last thing they'd want to do was blow up my body" (Kureishi, p. 119). Taking advantage of the last option he is left with, he buys a can of petrol and soaks his whole body in it, and once his persecutors encircle him, he threatens them to fatally damage the thing they want more than anything else: "I held the lighter close to my chest. I didn't know how much closer I could get it without turning into a bonfire. Still, rather self-immolation than the degradation which would otherwise be my fate. I'd go out with a bang, burning like a torch, screaming down the road" (Kureishi, p. 126). Although neither of these self-destructive burnings actually take place in the two narratives, both creatures are willing to set fire to their body and delete any trace of their existence, but for different reasons: Frankenstein's creature feels like he has reached the end of his purposeless existence, he has strived for love and sympathy all his life but has never been given the chance to experience them, and he feels that this is all his wretched body's fault. On the other hand, Adam wants to live more but is willing to destroy his body rather than give it to his chasers: "I'm not handing my body over to anyone. I'm just settling in. We're getting attached" (Kureishi, p. 99). Both narratives end with the two creatures running away from certain death towards an unclear future; the open ending of the two stories leaves the readers wondering if there is hope for the two of them to get an happy ending, but they can only witness as they are "borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance (Shelley, p. 222)".

Although I have concluded the first part of this chapter dealing with the end of the two novels and, ideally, the "literary death" of the two creatures, in the next few pages I will to move back to the moment of their birth, in order to retrace the ways in which their un-human bodies contributed to the formation (or reconceptualisation) of their identity.

4.2 - Two Newborns in Front of the Mirror: Lacan and the "What Was I?" Question

> A theory-loving friend of mine has an idea that the notion of the self, of the separate, self-conscious individual, and of any auto-biography which that self might tell or write, developed around the same time as the invention of the

> mirror, first made en masse in Venice in the early sixteenth century. When people could consider their own faces, expressions of emotions and bodies for a sustained period, they could wonder who they were and how they were different from and similar to others. […] According to my friend, if a creature can't see himself, he can't mature. He can't see where he ends and others begin. This process can be aided by hanging a mirror in an animal's cage. (Kureishi, p. 28)

Moving along the literary features that I have decided to analyse and compare with regard to Shelley's and Kureishi's novels, I would like now to take into account the early life experiences their creatures live soon after the peculiar surgeries that give them life are carried out with success. As I have claimed in the previous chapters of this thesis, not only do the two subjects share the same kind of unnatural conception, but shortly after their 'birth', they are either abandoned (as in the case of Shelley) or let free to explore and live (as in the case of Kureishi) by the men who gave them life. Of course, right after their birth they don't live the same kind of childhood experiences: Adam intentionally underwent the "body-swapping" procedure, and he is immediately ready to enjoy his long-yearned renewed agility and flexibility provided by his new body: "I sat lay down, jumped up and down, touched myself, wiggled my fingers and toes, shook my arms and legs and, finally, placed my head carefully on the floor before kicking myself up and standing on it – something I hadn't done for twenty- five years. There was a lot to take in" (Kureishi, pp. 28-29). In fact, Adam is not a newborn in the strict sense of the term, because he has already been a child once, he had parents who helped him to grow up and develop into an adult man and therefore he already knows how to 'use' a body and behave among other people; in short, he can skip the process of early development that children normally go through during the early stages of their life and he just needs to learn how to cope with the unfamiliar bulkiness of his new body, because, as he soon notices, "[m]y feet were an unnecessary distance from my waist. […] I'd never been unfamiliar with the dimensions of my own body before" (Kureishi, p. 40). However, it doesn't take him long before he gets familiar with and confident in it, and shortly after he is free to venture into the world, in order to make the most out of his new facility.

Instead, when listening to Frankenstein's creature's recollection of his first days of life, readers are faced with a genuine account of an adult body experiencing the world for the first time. Just like a child, the creature gradually gets to know the world that surrounds him, the bodily needs he has to learn how to quench, the ways in which his body and the world are in mutual connection and how he can use one to cope with the other. However, if a child usually has parental figures who accompany him/her through

this journey of gradual discovery, from the beginning of his life the creature is left to his own, abandoned by his father and forced to quickly learn how to survive in a foreign environment, relying on his own senses alone:

> It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct. A strange multiplicity of sensations seized me, and I saw, felt, heard, and smelt at the same time; and it was, indeed, a long time before I learned to distinguish between the operations of my various senses. By degrees, I remember, a stronger light pressed upon my nerves, so that I was obliged to shut my eyes. Darkness then came over me and troubled me, but hardly had I felt this when, by opening my eyes, as I now suppose, the light poured in upon me again. I walked and, I believe, descended, but I presently found a great alteration in my sensations. […] I lay by the side of a brook resting from my fatigue, until I felt tormented by hunger and thirst. This roused me from my nearly dormant state, and I ate some berries which I found hanging on the trees or lying on the ground. I slaked my thirst at the brook, and then lying down, was overcome by sleep. (Shelley, p. 102)

However, among the many peculiar experiences that both Shelley's and Kureishi's creatures undergo early on in their new, fragmented bodies, the one that I would like to concentrate on in the next few pages is the inner mutation and development they go through when, for the first time, they find themselves face-to-face with their own reflected image. According to the French psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, this first encounter signals the inception of the process of formation of one's self: between six and eighteen months of age, when children see their reflection and recognize themselves in it, Lacan claims that they enter in the so-called "mirror stage" and they begin to understand themselves as unified beings, separate from the rest of the world. This identification is "the donning of an identity, an 'armor' against the chaotic or fragmentary body"[313] and it is therefore "contingent on the repression of the earliest experience of the body, which is of the body as fragmented. Moreover, this process of repression generates the 'hallucination' of the self as corresponding to a whole and coherent body".[314] Although neither of the two characters in the novels is a child in the strict sense of the word, and even though the readers do not witness, using Lacan's words, "the striking spectacle of a nursling in front of a mirror who has not yet mastered walking, or even standing but who […] overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the constraints of his prop in order to adopt

[313] L. J. Davis (2005), "Visualizing the Disabled Body: The Classical Nude and the Fragmented Torso". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.) (2005), *The Body: a Reader*, cit., pp.167-181, p. 173.
[314] M. Fraser, M. Greco (2005), "Normal Bodies (or not)". In M. Fraser, M. Greco (eds.) (2005), *The Body: a Reader*, cit., pp. 145-150, p. 147.

a slightly leaning-forward position and take in an instantaneous view of the image in order to fix it in his mind",[315] in the next few pages I would like to make use of Lacan's development of his mirror-stage theory as to explore the different ways in which the creatures described in the two novels learn to identify themselves with (but, as in the case of Frankenstein's creature, not necessarily come to accept) their reflected image.

At the beginning of his essay *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience,* Lacan claims that, when children recognize themselves in a mirror, they are drawn to carry out a "series of gestures in which [they] playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates - namely, the child's own body, and the persons and even things around him".[316] This is exactly what Kureishi's Adam does: bewildered by the fact that the operation actually worked, "I continued to examine myself in the mirror, stepping forwards and backwards, examining my hairy arms and legs, turning my head here and there, opening and closing my mouth, looking at my good teeth and wide, clean tongue, smiling and frowning, trying different expressions" (Kureishi, p. 35). What Kureishi describes is the satisfying experience of a man who, for the first time after many years, manages to look in a mirror and finally sees an image that suits his own vision of selfhood: that of a muscular, sexy young man ready to enjoy the best life has to offer and challenge himself with new, exciting experiences. Of course this is paradoxical, because for the first time in over 60 years Adam looks in a mirror and sees a face and a body that really have nothing to do with who he is, with the person he has been all his life; instead, just as if he was in a boutique's changing room, he enjoys his new purchase and is pleased by the expectation of all the good things that he anticipates will come out of it.

On the other hand, Frankenstein's creature's first glimpse in the water pool that reflects his image is anything but a positive experience, because "[i]n a grim variation on the Narcissus myth, the creature beholds his reflection […] and is terrified, the inimical image contradicting, if not nullifying, his nascent sense of a benevolent self".[317] In the few episodes when he came across human beings, the creature experienced vexations and

[315] J. Lacan, B. Fink (trans.) (2006), "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". In J. Lacan, B. Fink (trans.) (2006) *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, pp. 75-81, pp. 75-76.
[316] *Idem*, p. 75.
[317] B. Wyse (2018), "'The Human Senses Are Insurmountable Barriers': Deformity, Sympathy and Monster Love in Three Variations on *Frankenstein*". In C. M. Davidson, M. Mulvey-Roberts (eds.) (2018), *Global Frankenstein. Studies in Global Science Fiction*, cit., pp. 75-90, p. 77.

rejection, but until the moment he meets his reflection he cannot understand the reasons of the negative reactions he aroused. Therefore, instead of falling in love with himself, which is something that happens both to Narcissus and Kureishi's Adam, the creature is terrified by what he sees in that water pool, he is unable to accept that what he is staring at really is what others see when they look at him, and immediately develops a feeling of hatred towards his image and himself:

> I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers – their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions; but how was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity. (Shelley, pp. 113-114)

Indeed, the traumatic event that the creature experiences the first time he sees himself in that water pool will unforgettably affect him for the rest of his life. In fact, Felice Cimatti claims that "*Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* is a Lacanian novel; it is the novel about what happens when the 'mirror stage' does not succeed",[318] and once again he claims that it is Victor Frankenstein who must be blamed for this, in that it was his rejection of his own, infant child that precluded his creature the formation of his own identity and, as a consequence of this, it was the pitiless father who condemned him to a life burdened by a never-ending struggle to be accepted. Not only does Cimatti observe that, in the traditional development of the 'mirror-stage', "there is always a third party between the infant and the mirror: an adult […] who ensures the infant what she is seeing is her own image", but he also remarks that "in the 'mirror stage' the child recognizes herself in the mirror only if the adult who holds her smiles at her".[319] Therefore, parental approval is a decisive aspect in the process of self-recognition, but since Victor Frankenstein categorically refuses to support, help and love his child, this is condemned to solitude and perpetual lack of identity. Of course, the creature tries to overcome his fate, reaching out for sympathy and looking out for substitute parental models in the De Lacey family: "When I slept, or was absent, the forms of the venerable blind father, the gentle Agatha, and the excellent Felix, flitted before me. I looked upon them as superior beings, who would be the arbiters of my future destiny" (Shelley, pp. 114-115), however

[318] F. Cimatti (2016), "Frankenstein on Language and Becoming (Post)Human". *Ecozon@: European Journal of Literature, Culture and Environment*, vol. 7, n. 1 (2016), pp. 10-27, p. 13.
[319] *Ibidem*.

they refuse to take responsibility for his 'upbringing', because they cannot overcome the fear induced by his monstrous body and, just like any other character in the novel, they "assume that his outer appearance is a valid index to his inner nature".[320] And if at first the creature is "unable to believe" that the monstrous figure he sees in the pond is indeed himself, over time he is forced to convince himself that he actually is that monster, gradually internalizing the hatred and abuse he is continually subjected to. In my view, this is in line with what Owen Hewitson said commenting Lacan's *Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function*: according to him, Lacan's theory is often misinterpreted, in that many assume that "once we have passed through the mirror stage we emerge at the other end with an ego".[321] Instead, he claims that Lacan is very careful with his pronouncements on the subject, and warns the readers that this is not an immediate passage; in fact, "[Lacan] says that the mirror stage reveals the relation of the child to his image, and that the image is the *Urbild* or prototype of the ego".[322] But the crucial passage, the creation of the actual ego, takes place at "the time at which the specular I turns into the social I",[323] meaning that it is neither the mirror as such, our own reflected image or the mirror-stage people get their ego from; instead, the process is completed when they finally manage to experience the social world, because "the mirror stage terminates when you stop looking at the reflection in the mirror and start looking at other people, your fellow beings".[324] Therefore, the creature's mirror-stage is bound to remain permanently incomplete, in that he has no reference "fellow beings" to identify himself with and separate himself from, and this is why he is eventually forced to admit that "I was dependent on none, and related to none. […] My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them" (Shelley, p. 128). His healthy, intelligent mind is unable to accept to be trapped within a deformed, monstrous body, that is what the creature eventually understands to be the constraint that prevents him to live a full, satisfying social life: the creature's tragedy is that "he is forced […] to accept the opinion of the only beings he has ever known and

[320] A. K. Mellor (2003), "Making a 'Monster': an Introduction to Frankenstein", cit., p. 20.
[321] O. Hewitson (2010), "What Does Lacan Say About The Mirror Stage?". Available from: https://www.lacanonline.com/2010/09/what-does-lacan-say-about-the-mirror-stage-part-i/ [Last accessed on March 1, 2020].
[322] *Idem*.
[323] J. Lacan, B. Fink (trans.) (2006), "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience", cit., p. 79.
[324] O. Hewitson (2010), "What Does Lacan Say About The Mirror Stage?", cit..

they all think that he is hideously ugly; in short, he is doomed to see himself as others see him",[325] and since everyone in the novel is prone to associate his ugliness with a wretched moral state, "[b]y consistently seeing the Creature as evil, the characters in the novel force him to become evil".[326]

The social implications offered (or denied) by one's body and the ways in which these influence one's assessment of their own identity are obviously at the centre of Hanif Kureishi's novella too; the writer has often manifested his interest in philosophy and psychoanalysis, and early on in *The Body* the protagonist casually mentions that "I am a cheap drunk. A few glasses and I can understand Lacan" (Kureishi, p. 4). In my view, this could be a warning for his readers: Kureishi might want to state that Lacan's theories – and among them those regarding body-image and identity in particular – have influenced his own belief that "identity and the self are totally fluid concepts – that they are determined by our relationships with others" and, as a consequence of this, "[i]f acquiring a new body might change the way others perceive and interact with you [...], it will change your self in some 'essential' way".[327] Many critics have observed that the idea of identity as a "constructed, multiply-determined, mixed, provisional and relational" entity that "emerges from a process of negotiation with the characters who surround one"[328] has long been at the centre of Kureishi's writing, and that in *The Body* he just claims once again that the concept of identity is deeply rooted in our physical being and connected with the social experiences that arise out of it. Kureishi sees identity as "performative and as subject to active negotiation",[329] and his works often describe a complex interplay of many cultural factors that keep re-shaping it. According to him:

> There aren't any formed identities, any finally formed identities. There isn't a day when you're there, when you're made. It keeps on going, you keep on engaging with your past in new ways all the time, over and over. […] So I don't believe that there is a final resting place in terms of identity; it's a continuous process. I mean here I am, a man nearly fifty, and I'm thinking about how in the next twenty years I'm going to die, and who I'm going to identify with as an older man. I'm going to read and think and look at other

[325] B. Wyse (2018), "'The Human Senses Are Insurmountable Barriers': Deformity, Sympathy and Monster Love in Three Variations on *Frankenstein*", cit., p. 78.
[326] A. K. Mellor (1990), "*Frankenstein* and the Sublime". Quoted in B. Wyse (2018), "'The Human Senses Are Insurmountable Barriers': Deformity, Sympathy and Monster Love in Three Variations on Frankenstein", cit., p. 78.
[327] T. Glencross (2003), "Interview With Hanif Kureishi", cit.
[328] B. Moore-Gilbert (1997), "Hanif Kureishi's The Buddha of Suburbia", p. 202. Quoted in B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit., p. 150.
[329] B. Buchanan (2007), *Hanif Kureishi*, cit., p. 14.

old guys, and find an identity out of all these bits and pieces.[330]

By way of conclusion, I would like to summarize the two main points that I have tried to carry out in this thesis. Firstly, that in both novels the action is born out of feelings of fear and anxiety connected with human corporeality: ageing, physical decay and death are features congenital to all human beings, but both Victor Frankenstein and the old Adam are unwilling to accept this fact. Indeed, they both resort to the means offered by science and technology to try and dominate the natural life process and, at first, they apparently succeed in their objectives. However, they are soon bound to learn that meddling with nature without considering in advance the possible negative outcomes of one's actions is a high risk, and even though in the beginning they both seem to have reached their long-yearned goals, cheating nature and gaining control over death and ageing, they later have to acknowledge that such selfish actions have a tremendous cost and do not, ultimately, provide them with the originally desired result.

Secondly, the surgeries performed in the two novels both give birth to un-human creatures; these are both the product of laboratory experiments that involve the assemblage of different body parts, that are reanimated and brought back to life. However, their life experiences and the perception readers have when approaching the stories of the two creatures are quite diverse: on the one hand, Adam seems to be blessed by the rejuvenating process, but both the fact that his new life necessarily requires inhabiting the body of a dead 'donor', and the fact that he is prone to discard his own body expecting that there will be no consequences, make him a negative character who is bound to get punished: the experiment he willingly accepts to take part in advances the idea of a future society in which bodies will be considered as mere vehicles that can be discarded and replaced when no longer useful, but this implies that new bodies will need to be made constantly available, eliminating the subject who inhabits that body in order to make room for a new one. Kureishi brings about a dystopic vision of a future in which the wealthy and powerful can keep on living to the detriment of the 'dregs of society', who are exploited in new, inhumane ways. Moreover, the writer describes how Adam and the other body-buyers assume that their brain, "though material, behaves like the traditional immaterial and immortal soul—maturing but not aging, and insuring the personality's survival after death"[331] and that, on the contrary, their decaying physical body is not

[330] *Idem*, p. 123.
[331] F. Vidal (2016), "Frankenstein's Brain: 'The Final Touch'", cit., p. 88.

involved in the definition of personal identity. However, as the protagonist eventually comes to understand, the body's role is not simply that of a brain's repository, but it is a person's interface with the outer world, which necessarily shapes that person's view on the world surrounding him/her and, and the same time, determines how the world sees and evaluates that subject. In fact, this is the central proposition that I have taken into consideration in the analysis of both novels: the two creatures' life experiences are fundamentally determined by the peculiar bodies they 'wear' and that (both in Kureishi's contemporary 21st century society, as well as in the 19th century one in which Shelley's creature lives) are the first thing that people who meet them use to interpret how they are in terms of personality: if on the one hand Adam manages to escape from the apathetic life that he feels his old body had condemned him to, and after the surgery his new body becomes the enabling tool that rekindles the zest for life he had long set aside (before he realizes that he has willingly condemned himself to live in a foreign body and witness his old life as an external spectator), Frankenstein's creature's life is doomed to be spent in a state of imposed loneliness that cannot give him any hope for the future, because although the reader perceives that he is a good-natured and sympathetic being, those who judge him using their eyes cannot overcome the terrifying and repulsive feelings his monstrous body generates in them. But as distinct from Adam, Frankenstein's creature never asked to be brought to life, he never had the chance to choose his body, and he is repeatedly denied the only thing he ever asked for: love and affection.

To conclude, putting at the centre of their narrations two non-human characters that are also the narrators of their own stories, both authors question the stability of the concept of "human", pushing their readers to consider whether the technologically-mediated lives of their not-fully-human characters should be afforded the same kind of dignity and respect as any other human subject. This is the same kind of philosophical question that lies at the heart of posthumanism, that tries to de-privilege the traditional hierarchical status of the humanist subject: even though posthumanism does not mean to reject the humanist traditions of the past, it proposes a "reconceptualization of selfhood and social relations"[332] that seems to be more appropriate to describe the lives and modes of relations of the (post-)humans who live in the 21st century: "Humanist conceptualisations of selfhood as coherent, stable and individualistic are ill-suited to life

[332] V. Flanagan (2014), *Technology and Identity in Young Adult Fiction: the Posthuman Subject*, cit. p. 187.

in the new millennium",[333] in which computers are increasingly part of people's lives, advances in medicine and biotechnology allow diseased or malfunctioning body parts to be replaced with genetically engineered or mechanical substitutes and the increasing popularity of online social media is shifting the way most people who live in first-world countries conceive their own self and social relations too. With this in mind, what both Shelley's prescient novel and Kureishi's (not too) futuristic novella seem to advocate for is an ethical development of science and technology that will not create further hierarchies and new subaltern classes among individuals but, in a hopeful and positive view of the future, will work towards the realization of better life conditions for every species living on earth.

[333] *Idem*, p. 190.

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ABSTRACT

Lo scopo di questa tesi è proporre un'analisi e un confronto fra due opere di genere fantascientifico che, sebbene siano state scritte in epoche diverse e da due autori che poco sembrano avere a che fare l'uno con l'altra, sono accumunate da un numero notevole di caratteristiche letterarie; tanto da far supporre che, nello scrivere la più recente delle due, l'autore possa essersi ispirato alla prima e, con la volontà di rendere omaggio ad un opera così rilevante per la storia della letteratura, ne abbia voluto proporre una riscrittura in chiave contemporanea.

La prima delle due opere che ho preso in considerazione per lo sviluppo di questa tesi è il romanzo che viene comunemente considerato come l'iniziatore del genere letterario della fantascienza: pubblicato da Mary Shelley nel 1818, "Frankenstein" è stata l'opera che per prima ha affrontato il tema dell'ingerenza della scienza e della tecnologia sul corpo umano; in un'epoca in cui questi nuovi campi del sapere stavano fiorendo, Shelley scrisse un romanzo che ancora oggi spinge i suoi lettori a riflettere sulle conseguenze del progresso scientifico incontrollato. Ispirandosi al mito di Prometeo e intersecando fantascienza e atmosfere gotiche, Mary Shelley diede vita ad un nuovo genere letterario grazie al suo avveniristico romanzo, in cui Victor Frankenstein, il moderno Prometeo divenuto oggi l'emblema dello "scienziato pazzo", deciso a superare i limiti imposti dalla natura si sostituisce a Dio, imponendosi come creatore di una nuova specie. Il risultato del suo avventato esperimento è una creatura dall'aspetto mostruoso che, a causa dei sentimenti di terrore e spavento che la sua vista provoca in Frankenstein stesso e negli altri esseri umani che egli incontra, diventa un reietto della società. Pur non volendo criticare il progresso tecnoscientifico in sé, da cui Mary Shelley stessa, nei suoi scritti dell'epoca, ammetteva di essere incuriosita e affascinata, in "Frankenstein" essa riuscì a condensare i timori intrinseci nell'uso sconsiderato delle nuove possibilità che il progresso scientifico stava favorendo, portando ad esiti non sempre prevedibili. La smania di conoscenza e l'ambizione dell'uomo ricevono nel romanzo un severo monito, poiché non sempre l'uomo è in grado di prevedere e controllare le conseguenze delle proprie scoperte. Questo tema è talmente attuale che il romanzo potrebbe essere stato scritto oggi come risposta agli interrogativi sul rapporto tra scienza ed etica, e non è dunque un caso se, due secoli dopo la pubblicazione del romanzo, i personaggi creati dalla penna di Shelley godono ancora di buona salute.

Il timore che deriva dall'uso improprio dei mezzi tecnologici è ancora vivo ai

giorni nostri e nella mia tesi voglio proporre il confronto di questo classico della letteratura con il romanzo breve pubblicato dallo scrittore inglese Hanif Kureishi nel 2002, il cui titolo, "Il Corpo", già identifica l'oggetto centrale della narrazione: se Mary Shelley per prima aveva permesso al suo protagonista di infondere nuovamente la vita ad un cadavere con l'unico scopo di diventare egli stesso padrone delle leggi della natura, all'alba del ventunesimo secolo lo stesso esperimento viene ripetuto con successo, ma con uno scopo ben diverso. Kureishi riprende il tema delle biotecnologie iniziato da Shelley due secoli prima, ma aggiunge a questo un altro grande tema sociale che caratterizza il mondo occidentale contemporaneo: il consumismo imperante diffuso dai mass media, che alimentano le insicurezze legate all'aspetto fisico dei compratori per trarne il massimo profitto. Kureishi ambienta la sua narrazione in una società in cui la compravendita di beni è portata agli estremi, tanto che dei facoltosi acquirenti possono permettersi di acquistare dei corpi nuovi, giovani e in buona salute, in cui hanno la possibilità di "trasferirsi" grazie ad un pionieristico (e molto costoso) trapianto di cervello da un corpo ad un altro. Nella società distopica creata da Kureishi, i corpi umani, una volta "svuotati" dal precedente proprietario, diventano accessori di lusso che possono essere indossati ed acquistati, e la loro compravendita alimenta un giro d'affari in cui uomini senza scrupoli sono pronti a gettarsi a capofitto.

Il quadro di riferimento teorico che ho scelto di utilizzare per analizzare le due opere è quello sviluppato attorno alle teorie del "postumano", un concetto che, pur presentando molte articolazione, pone l'attenzione sul rapporto tra uomo e tecnoscienza che caratterizza l'epoca attuale, e in particolare sulle straordinarie potenzialità della scienza e della tecnica che oggigiorno sono in grado di modificare l'organismo umano, integrandolo con apparati tecnologici che vengono ormai considerati normali complementi del corpo umano (dalle lenti a contatto alle protesi, dal pacemaker agli apparecchi acustici), creando di fatto un essere ibrido, non più necessariamente e interamente organico, un *cyborg* che trascende i tradizionali limiti umani e che mette in discussione una serie di dicotomie che hanno caratterizzato l'identità unitaria dell'uomo a partire dall'Umanesimo. Infatti, se nella loro componente futurologica le teorie del postumano speculano sulla possibilità di utilizzare le tecnologie per perfezionare l'essere umano e superarne i naturali limiti biologici, quali la malattia, l'invecchiamento e, ovviamente, la morte, nella sua componente filosofica il postumanesimo propone un ripensamento radicale del soggetto liberale e della tradizione umanistica occidentale. Al centro di questo ripensamento vi è innanzitutto il superamento della centralità che

l’Umanesimo ha attribuito all'essere umano, riconoscendo invece che esso è in constante relazione sia con gli organismi non-umani che popolano il pianeta, sia con gli utensili e i macchinari di cui si serve per fare esperienza del mondo e, dunque, per adattarsi ad esso. L'antropocentrismo umanista viene dunque contestato dal postumanesimo e, insieme ad esso, vengono rigettati tutta una serie di dualismi statici, proponendo invece una visione dell'identità umana caratterizzata da plasticità, molteplicità e relazioni dinamiche.

Il motivo per cui ritengo adeguato utilizzare queste teorie contemporanee per proporre un'analisi dei due testi letterari che ho preso in considerazione è che, riconoscendo il contributo della scienza e della tecnologia nello sviluppo della vita umana sulla terra, le teorie del postumano mettono al centro delle proprie discussioni le ricadute etiche, sociali e socio-economiche che queste comportano, criticando invece lo scarso interesse che il mondo della scienza sembra talvolta dimostrare per questi temi. Allo stesso modo, con la volontà di creare un dibattito proficuo e un dialogo tra il mondo delle discipline scientifiche e quello delle discipline umanistiche, all'inizio del diciannovesimo secolo Mary Shelley consegnò ai propri lettori un romanzo che, ancora oggi, li obbliga a riflettere sulle ripercussioni degli esperimenti scientifici e sulle conseguenze di un progresso avventato che non tiene in considerazione gli aspetti sociali che questi possono avere. Due secoli più tardi, Hanif Kureishi si rivolge ai propri lettori, ponendoli di fronte agli stessi interrogativi, con la consapevolezza che oggi più che mai il progresso scientifico è ad un passo dalla creazione di nuovi “mostri”.