

**Parallel Session 8: The role of books and literature in public
communication of science**

**FRANKENSTEIN BY MARY SHELLEY: SCIENCE, ITS MYTHS AND
ITS MONSTERS**

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Abstract

We discuss the trajectory of public acceptance of the novel *Frankenstein*. We centered ourselves in the mythic stature reached by the creature and in its role in the popularization of the work. We start from the idea that the novel's great success was due to the public interest in the monster, and the fact that the work turns to the recreation of life, aspect that historically arises strong interest by equalizing men and gods. We also observe that the *Frankenstein* creature produces interest by the fact that it brings up questions about the individual, his individuality and relations with the other.

Key Words: Scientific Diffusion, Science Fiction

Text

The fact that techno-scientific development has continuously generated hopes and apprehensions in eastern societies is not new. From the 19th century on, this process has made many futurist predictions become part of the daily life of great population contingents. In this context, it emerged the literary genre that later became acknowledged as science fiction. After all, according to Isaac Asimov's definition, science fiction is the line of literature that deals with men's answers to the changes that occurred in the level of science and technology" (Asimov, 1984:146).

Inaugurating science fiction as a literary style, *Frankenstein* brought to public keen criticism to the pretension of knowledge without frontiers or ethic limitations, violently questioning men's excessive ambition – value which is more and more encouraged by the ascending bourgeois society. Although the work is characterized as a rejection to these values, such criticism shows itself as addressed to a determined kind of knowledge and to a way of its practices organization: it is at the same time a lampoon against the elicited manipulation of nature, and a criticism to the fact that the science of that time was an exclusive prerogative of the masculine sphere (Rocque e Teixeira, 2001).

All this critical potential existent in *Frankenstein*, has not become old over the course of time. On the contrary, it has gained body as the work was reinvented in other media – mainly by the cinema – with the simplification of the original

story, which little by little would be transformed into a horror tale that has as its protagonist a monstrous creature. Today, the quick development of biological sciences, especially genetics, makes the human mind surmise more the possibility of one day science having total power to recreate life in a laboratory. In this context, the Frankenstein myth shows itself even stronger.

The valorization of Shelley's work should also be seen by the strength of the being she created through Victor's hands. The creature seems to have own life, excelling himself in front of the rest of the novel. It is related to the monster category itself, whose existence, real or imaginary, invites us to reflect on human's limitations, or in a last analysis, on our own conception of subjectivity.

In the context of decay of the Cartesian singular reason and ascension of multiple and fragmentary subjectivity, monsters become the source of great interest while their existence addresses to the particularity of our subjectivity statute. This way, they lead us to think the question of alterity, because when certainties about the centralization of the individual vanish, more and more the other – the different one – has its social place rethought. Such aspect goes beyond the limits of academic reflection, touching the general public. The other's place, or condition, and its human or monstrous classification are in the heart of the super valorization of the character created by Victor Frankenstein.

As it is the representation of the different, the abominable, and also the socially unacceptable, the monster allows the formation of an identity, and the creation of a collection of signs that distinguish what is wanted as human from the monstrous and from a group of norms that indicate what is acceptable or abject (Cohen, 2000).. In our case, Shelley and Victor's monster brings within himself another fear, thus in front of his creator's human identity he demands his own identity, independently, his reason of existing – which can be seen in the fact that he asks his creator to create a partner for him as well.

Claiming for their rights, the monsters show themselves as even more threatening, as they leave in the air the fact that the differences between human and monstrous are arbitrary and fluid, related to moments and spaces. After all, monsters are a cultural creation totally related to our way of seeing ourselves and the other, and there resides much of our attraction to these figures.

Incited to write Frankenstein by a competition with a group of friends about who could write the best ghost story, Mary Shelley may have never dreamt about being capable of writing a story which over the course of time would achieve such notoriety. It is as if the monster had obtained more than the acknowledgement he demanded from his creator. Sprung up almost two hundred years ago, he continues to inhabit the anguish and dreams of our post-modern world, incorporating controversies over the ethic limits of science and knowledge in a general way, making us continuously rethink the relation of these limits with the complex questions of alterity and tolerance and the responsibility of the whole society in these imperative questions.

References

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