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The Legacy of *Frankenstein's* Creature: Monstrosity and Female Grotesque in Mary Shelley, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson

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Abstract

Tale tesi di dottorato in Letteratura inglese (European PhD EDGES – Women's and Gender Studies, XXXIV ciclo) costituisce un'indagine sulla rappresentazione del corpo mostruoso secondo le scrittrici inglesi Mary Shelley, Angela Carter e Jeanette Winterson. Obiettivo del lavoro è osservare attraverso quali modalità la rappresentazione delle categorie di mostruoso, abietto (Kristeva) e grottesco (Bakhtin e Russo) nell'immaginario culturale occidentale sia stata influenzata nel tempo e attraverso i generi letterari. Nelle autrici prese in esame, il soggetto mostruoso si configura come alternativa all'ideale antropocentrico incarnato dal soggetto normativo, di cui Victor Frankenstein costituisce il massimo esponente. Allo stesso tempo, sarà possibile osservare come all'interno dei romanzi di Shelley, Carter e Winterson siano presenti luoghi considerati *anti-topoi* all'interno dei quali il mostro può acquisire un posizionamento e rivendicare una voce, finalizzata a generare una contronarrazione dell'immaginario veicolato dal soggetto normativo. La mostruosità delineata da Shelley in *Frankenstein* e *The Last Man* costituisce il punto di partenza dell'indagine, con lo scopo di osservare come il discorso del corpo normativo vs. il corpo antinormativo si intersechi con il discorso degli spazi del centro vs. gli spazi del margine. In *The Passion of New Eve* e *Nights at the Circus* di Carter, il mostruoso femminile incarna volontà, desideri e rivendicazioni che mettono in crisi il sistema eteronormativo. Lo spazio dell'alterità in cui la donna-mostro viene confinata diviene possibilità di rimodellamento dell'identità per il soggetto, decostruendo la logica del potere che l'ha plasmato all'interno della società. Winterson, infine, crea due donne mostruose in *Sexing the Cherry* e *The Passion* che si muovono negli spazi urbani oscillando tra centro e margine, e testimoniando l'arbitrarietà del sistema e i suoi punti deboli. Allo stesso modo, in *Frankissstein* Winterson recupera il romanzo originale di Shelley trasformandolo in una speculazione parodica e intertestuale sulla fluidità identitaria e sui limiti del transumanesimo.

Abstract

This English Literature thesis (European PhD EDGES – Women's and Gender Studies – 34th cycle) is an investigation into the representation of the monstrous body according to the British writers Mary Shelley, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson. The main objective is to observe how the representation of the categories of monstrous, abject (Kristeva) and grotesque (Bakhtin and Russo) in Western cultural imagination have been influenced across time and literary genres. In the novels of Shelley, Carter and Winterson, the monstrous subject is configured as an alternative to the anthropocentric ideal embodied by the normative subject, of which Victor Frankenstein is the paradigmatic exponent. Plus, there are places considered *anti-topoi* within which the monster acquires a situatedness and claims a voice, generating an opposed counter-narrative to the imaginary conveyed by the normative subject. Monstrosity outlined by Shelley in the novels *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* constitutes the starting point of my research, aiming to observe how the discourse of the normative body vs. the anti-normative body intersects with the discourse of the spaces of the centre vs. the spaces of the margin. In Carter's novels *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus*, the monstrous female constitutes the embodiment of wills, desires and claims challenging the heteronormative system. The space of otherness in which Carter's monster-woman is confined becomes a possibility of reshaping identity for the Subject, deconstructing the logic of power that moulded her within society. Finally, Winterson creates two monstrous women in *Sexing the Cherry* and *The Passion* who move through urban spaces, going from the centre to the margins and testifying to the arbitrariness of the system and its weaknesses. Similarly, in *Frankissstein*, Winterson recovers Shelley's original novel and transforms it into a parodic and intertextual speculation on the fluidity of identity and the limits of transhumanism.

Abstract

Esta tesis doctoral en literatura inglesa (European PhD EDGES - Women's and Gender Studies, Cycle XXXIV) investiga la representación del cuerpo monstruoso según Mary Shelley, Angela Carter y Jeanette Winterson. El objetivo del trabajo es observar cómo haya influido la representación de las categorías de lo monstruoso, lo abyecto y lo grotesco en el imaginario cultural occidental a lo largo del tiempo y a través de los géneros literarios. En las autoras examinadas, el sujeto monstruoso se configura como una alternativa al ideal antropocéntrico encarnado por el sujeto normativo, del que Victor Frankenstein constituye el máximo exponente. Al mismo tiempo en las novelas de Shelley, Carter y Winterson hay lugares considerados anti-topoi dentro de los cuales el monstruo pueda adquirir una posición y reclamar una voz, generando una contranarrativa del imaginario del sujeto normativo. La monstruosidad esbozada por Shelley en *Frankenstein* y *The Last Man* constituye el punto de partida de la investigación, observando cómo el discurso del cuerpo normativo y antinormativo se cruza con el discurso sobre los espacios del centro y del margen. En *The Passion of New Eve* y *Nights at the Circus* de Carter, la mujer monstruosa encarna voluntades, deseos y reivindicaciones que desafían el sistema heteronormativo. El espacio de alteridad en el que está confinada se convierte en una posibilidad de reconfiguración de la identidad para el sujeto, deconstruyendo la lógica del poder que la ha moldeado dentro de la sociedad. Winterson, por último, crea en *Sexing the Cherry* y *The Passion* dos mujeres monstruosas que se mueven en espacios urbanos oscilando entre el centro y el margen, testimoniando la arbitrariedad del sistema y de sus debilidades. Asimismo, en *Frankissstein* Winterson recupera la novela de Shelley transformándola en una especulación paródica e intertextual sobre la fluidez de la identidad y los límites del transhumanismo.

Introduction

This PhD thesis offers a comparative study between the three English authors Mary Shelley, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson, whereas Shelley's literary works, *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* (1826), will serve as hypotexts¹ from where to start exploring the role of the Creature's body as a monstrous and abject corporeality (Kristeva), and it will show how the monster's paradigmatic representation of anti-Subject reverberates in the literary works of Carter and Winterson.

The main aim of this PhD study has been to investigate, throughout the works of Shelley, Carter and Winterson, on the evolution of the monstrous Subject as a figuration of resistance against the patriarchal logics. My work also aimed to be a dissertation on the methods of resistance to heteronormative power, and an application to literary case studies of an ideological and political resistance against an idea of mainstream, normative centre vs. those marginalised spaces and identities co-existing within Western cultural representation. These spaces and embodiments of Otherness, we will see, are fundamental for the normative system to create a symbolic alterity that legitimises the normative Subject as such, and identifies the Other as Monster, and therefore to be expelled from the category of Norm.

Norm, then, is a performance, and the (queer) Monster exists in order to challenge this performance. Therefore, I will demonstrate how resistance must not only be considered as a cartographic space of opposition, but also as an interiorization through the body of that opposition to constitutionalised authorities.

Mary Shelley constitutes a crucial starting point in this perspective in which I wanted to correlate the discourse of monstrous identity with the discourse of spatiality as a place of claim. In fact, as it will be possible to observe, both in *Frankenstein* (1818) and in *The Last Man* (1826) monstrosity appropriates the liminal space to subvert the rules imposed on the monster by the so-called

¹ Genette, Gerard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the second degree*. Vol. 8. University of Nebraska Press, 1997.

'Normative Subject'. Nevertheless, I will show how in the novels and short stories analysed the margin is transformed both into a place of resistance from which the monster can rise to the condition of subject, and into places where the law of the Norm is suspended, where even the normative subject is consequently forced to go through a process of deconstruction of the Self. Mary Shelley constitutes a crucial starting point in this perspective, in which I wanted to correlate the discourse of monstrous identity with the discourse of spatiality as a place of claim. In fact, as it will be possible to observe, both in *Frankenstein* and in *The Last Man* monstrosity appropriates the liminal space to subvert the rules imposed on the monster by the so-called 'Normative Subject'. In *Frankenstein*, the binomial between Man and Monster is very clear, and it emerges in several environments, such as in Victor's laboratory, where Victor is the Master and the monster is his creation. Here, in fact, the monstrosity of the Creature becomes apparent to Victor after his creation comes to life, and thus becomes a living, thinking being, a subject, a man brought back from the «utmost of abjection»¹, to use an expression of Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982): the living dead, who formulate rational thoughts, who have feelings and who recognise to themselves their own condition of inhuman being when they are rejected by the DeLacey family, whom he has carefully observed and admired as the highest expression of humanity within a family unit. This binomial Man-Monster is also replicated in the glaciers, both during the famous confrontation between Victor and the Creature, where the Creature speaks for the first time and tells the account of his experiences, and at the Poles, where the final confrontation between Victor and the Creature ends with the cancellation of the binomial Man-Monster, that is, with the disappearance of both components of this binomial in the liminal space of the Arctic ice.

On the contrary, in *The Last Man* monstrosity manifests itself in the form of an implacable Female Plague, which devours, kills and transmutes everything, from East to West, uniting all the inhabitants of Planet Earth in a pandemic catastrophe that will reach its apotheosis in the representation of the city of London ravaged by disease, misery and anarchy, all consequences of the lethal disease that only Lionel Verney, the eponymous last man from the title, will survive. It will be interesting to note how many literary critics, including Jane Aaron, have come to see in *The Last Man's* Female Plague the vengeful incarnation of the female mate ever created by Victor Frankenstein, and who protests to bring his deadly project to fruition here, by transforming the human race into his 'hideous progeny' heralded and feared by Victor.

With regard to Angela Carter's case study, my interest has been in seeking a connection between the notions of body, identity and desire, and how this search for a balance between these three elements generates a path for Carter's characters that diverges from the logic of heteronormative powers. In Carter's works we can identify manipulated, subjugated, mutilated and arbitrarily re-sexualised bodies. What stimulated my attention to the latter aspect is the main theme of her novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), and Carter's discourse on the deconstruction of conceptions of norm, monolithic identity, sexual binarism, dichotomy of relations between Creator and Creature, monstrosity, femininity, masculinity and alienation from mainstream culture. At the same time, I considered, looking for divergences and convergences with this representation of the female subject and the body, some of Carter's short stories (from her collections *Fireworks* or *The Bloody Chamber*), where Carter plays with the symbol of the mirror and the fetishization of the female body as erotic object, as we can see in the short story *The Loves of Lady Purple*.

Another Carter's novel that will be the object of analysis for me is *Nights at the Circus* (1984), where the role of the monstrous bird-woman is to be continually exposed to the gaze of the public, who identify her as a monster in its Latin meaning (the root of the noun '*monstrum*' = prodigy, divine portent, warning, is

the same as the verb '*monstrare*'= to appear, to manifest). Fevvers, the novel's protagonist, makes herself a public monster, claims her condition of monstrosity in order to profit from it within the normative society of Victorian London, where the only way for a monster like her is to become a freak.

On the other hand, as we shall see, Fevvers' movement from the centre, London, to the margin, will be an opportunity to question her own image and authentic individual perception of what it means to be a monstrous female. If in the translation of the Latin word *monstrum* we also find the meaning of 'warning', it will therefore be easy to identify in Carter the attempt to transform Fevvers into the monstrous woman symbol of the emancipation of the Victorian New Woman. In this regard, I find interesting the intertextual compatibility between the sentence uttered by Fevvers in the third part of the novel in which Fevvers announces her intentions of reshaping her partner in order to transform him into the ideal mate for the New Woman ("I'll make a new man of him. I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the New Century") and Victor Frankenstein's fears concerning the potential of the female mate for his Creature, as well as the potential for proliferation of a 'hideous progeny' announced by Mary Shelley.

Regarding the works of Jeanette Winterson, while aware of her contribution to the debate on sexual identity and the materiality of the body, particularly with her novels *Written on the body* (1991) and *Oranges are not the only fruit* (1985), I have focused mainly on her novels *The Passion* (1987), *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), and her most recent novel, *Frankissstein* (2019). In these three works, as it will be possible to observe, Winterson develops a discourse on the monstrosity of the queer body that moves within urban spaces, and makes the monster's bodily condition a bridge between two places, a symbolic centre and a symbolic margin (although also geographical places), as it happens with the characters of Villanelle in Venice and the Dog-Woman in 17th century London and 19th century Venice from *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*. *Frankissstein*, on the other hand, aims to be a queer, dystopian, transhumanist, cyberpunk, and parodic reinterpretation of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, where the key aspect of

the story is the representation of a coexistence of fluid-identity bodies with Artificial Intelligences. The archetype of a monstrous creation thus acquires a new relevance that negotiates with posthuman and transhuman studies, highlighting not only the artificial body as a consumer product of pornographic capitalism, which de-humanises bodies by making them mere orifices of artificial flesh deprived of their identity, but rather the adaptation of the human body to technological progress.

I also believe that another aspect of fundamental relevance is the metamorphosis of the discourse on monstrosity in the case-study novels I analysed, depending on the age in which this topic has been developed by the authors, even because of the historical, literary, and socio-cultural background in which each of the three authors has lived and written. The major difference in style, age and literary current is the one between on one hand Mary Shelley, a Romantic author, and on the other Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson. These last two authors, in fact, belong to contemporary British literature and they both use the postmodernist tools of intertextuality and citation, despite Winterson's controversial position on postmodernism (see Chapter 4).

However, Mary Shelley explores the theme of monstrosity and the duality between humanity and anti-humanity by criticising the anthropocentric imaginary and the liberal-humanist idea of Man as the only owner of his own body, and taking elements from the Burkian theorization of the Sublime, the Western cultural imagery of abjection as epitome of Otherness, and the recent technological discoveries of Galvanism, which inspired her the writing of the 1818 novel.

Vice versa, in *The Passion of New Eve*, Angela Carter works on monstrosity by playing with the influences of her contemporary New Age culture, the spreading of mass media, the rise of the so-called 2nd wave feminism, the fight for civil rights between Black African American minorities and the white supremacy, and the recurring aspect of deconstructing the Western cultural tradition that postmodernism embraced. Therefore, Carter herself attempts to deconstruct in her 1977 novel the colonising idea of the American dream and of America as the

holy ground of professional realization among the lobbies of white patriarchal power. She rather represents through the gaze of Evelyn, a Londoner, white, misogynist man surgically transformed into a woman, an opposite scenario of desertic desolation, where the separatist and parthenogenetic community of women of Beulah has taken place, and where men are as objectified as women in normative civilization.

The desert, which represents the main setting for the picaresque journey of rebirth and resurrection for Evelyn transformed into Eve (the “passion” from the title clearly recalls the Passion of Christ), diametrically opposes itself to the urbanistic, decadent and industrialised landscape from where Evelyn is escaping, leaving an urban war of sexes. Eve’s quest for Tristessa, female old-fashioned icon of Hollywood who voluntarily exiled herself from the showbusiness, is both a re-discussion of gender roles and their performativity, whereas biological sex is constantly manipulated, and the male and female identities are interchanged between Eve and Tristessa, who will later come out as a drag queen.

Jeanette Winterson, instead, chooses to set her *Frankissstein* in our present time, between a futuristic Phoenix, Arizona, and a Uchronian United Kingdom where the consequences of Brexit are still going on, and where the debate on sexual identity and bodily manipulation has evolved into a cyberpunk, transhumanist reality.

In this new exploration of the Shelleyan archetype of Creator-Creature, some of the characters from the hypotext are here reintroduced as brand-new characters. Dr. Ry Shelley, for instance, is a female-to-male transgender person who lives a condition of doubleness, probably due to his still dealing with gender dysphoria («I am liminal, cuspung, in between, emerging, undecided, transitional, experimental, a start-up - or is it up-start? – in my own life»²), who starts a relationship with Dr. Victor Stein, who is secretly working in a bunker in Manchester on a project that he considers as the outcome of human race, which is a technique of mutation of the human brain into a variety of forms, animal,

² Winterson, Jeanette, *Frankissstein: A Love Story*, Penguin Random House, 2019.

vegetal or mineral. As opposed to these two main characters, stands Dr. Ron Lord, a Byronic alter-ego.

2. Hypotheses and justification

My idea of working on an intertextual and queer discourse on corporeality, starting from *Frankenstein* and reaching postmodern feminism, comes from a key aspect in Sarah Lefanu's essay *Feminism and Science Fiction*, according to whom there is a Marxist alliance of subaltern experiences between alien (or monstrous) identities and women, which brings forth an effort from these two categories to ally in order to subvert the societal and cultural positions of centre and margin.³ The reason why I decided to establish a dialogue between a monstrous creation as the one from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and female, transgender and queer characters from Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson is because, in both their productions, the boundary that distinguishes subjectivity from alterity is erased, bringing alterity at the centre of the scene, and giving the reader a subverted perspective, from where heteronormative subjectivities are put in discussion.

According to what Julia Kristeva states in *Powers of Horror* (1982), abjection represents the embodiment for Western culture of all those characteristics that a subject, perfectly integrated in society, should not represent. The place of the abject is 'the place where meaning collapses', the place where 'I' am not. The abject threatens life; it must be 'radically excluded' from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the Self from what threatens the Self. Although the subject must exclude the abject, the abject must, nevertheless, be tolerated, since that abject which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life itself. The negation of an identity for the abject-body represents a revalidation for the subject. Furthermore, the activity of exclusion is necessary to guarantee that the subject takes up his/her proper place in relation to the symbolic.

³ Lefanu, Sarah, *Feminism and science fiction*, Utopian Studies, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1989.

In Shelley, Carter and Winterson, the abject identities are embodied by the erotic, chimerical and fetish females of novels like Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffmann* (1972), which also constituted a true leitmotiv in Carter's short stories, or Winterson's *The Passion* (1987). These eccentric corporealities are also reproduced in Winterson by the 'transsexual monster' from *Frankissstein*, or the unsexed, non-binary body from *Written on the Body*, acquiring a voice of their own, and suggesting another version of the conventional, shutted, negative connotation given to Otherness by the traditional literary canon and by Gothic and horror fiction. The alliance between the categories of women and monsters represents the alliance of the Other vs. The One, the Deleuzian subject of Majority, the dominating, colonising eye that Michel Foucault defines in *The Will to Knowledge* as the "biopolitics", i.e. «an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations»⁴.

The dialogue between these three female British authors and their contribution to the debate on the representation of the body in Western male imagery, even the Gothic and horror imagery, constitutes a stimulating ground for discussion on gender roles, non-binary systems of representation of biological sex, and alternative identities. In his essay *What is Queer about Frankenstein?*, George E. Haggerty argues that there is a narcissistic willingness in Victor Frankenstein's desire of giving birth to another creature and then rejecting it:

The implicit uncanniness of the action that results registers as queer precisely to the degree that normative sexual and domestic relations between man and woman are blasted by imaginative creativity and the quest for intimate and almost obsessive relations with the demonic. The demon that haunts Frankenstein throughout this novel is a demon of his own creation, and the ruthless pursuit of this creature that the novel dramatizes is, in one sense, a debilitating and self-destructive form of narcissism.⁵

⁴ Foucault, Michel. *The will to knowledge: The history of sexuality*, vol. I.", Penguin UK, 1998.

⁵ Smith, Andrew, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*'. Cambridge University Press, 2016., p. 117

Hence, I agree with Haggerty's idea that Frankenstein and the Creature are a reflection in a mirror, whereas Victor Frankenstein claims to be recognised as the Self, the normative subject, and as such he is guided by a self-destructive wish of generating life, he wants to be the Creator of life even knowing that this creation will condemn him, while the Creature instead is pushed to become the abject, the Other-from-the-Self.

In fact, as we will see in Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein*, the starting point for the action of the novel is the diaristic account of Mary Shelley's staying at Villa Diodati in 1816, when she conceived her novel according to historical events. In the novel, during an intellectual debate between Lord Byron and Mary Shelley on a dichotomic comparison between male creation and female creation, Byron claims that «the life-spark is male»⁶, while Mary Shelley answers that women are the ones delegated to generating life. From this starting point of the frame story to the central plotline of the novel there is a timelapse that brings us to the present, where a brand new Victor Frankenstein (named Victor Stein) is dealing with a secret revolutionary experiment destined to change human lives, while his ideological opposite, Ron Lord (a brand new Lord Byron), is a tycoon known as the inventor of a worldwide merchandising of sexbots, constituting a central point of discussion in the novel on the representation of manipulated bodies, and a critique to an objectifying eroticism. These topics stimulate an anti-anthropocentric reflection not only on what is human and what is not, but also on what are the limits of a new humanity based on a new ethics that overcomes the materiality of the body, and what are the costs for the accomplishment of erotic satisfaction.

Another important tool for my research has been Mikhail Bakhtin's trope of *grotesque body* as theorised in his essay *Rabelais and His World* (1965), written as a commentary work on French Renaissance author François Rabelais and his masterpiece *Gargantua et Pantagruel*. As Mikhail Bakhtin maintains, when

⁶ Winterson, Jeanette, *Frankissstein: A Love Story*, Penguin Random House, 2019, p. 13

Rabelais was writing, the grotesque body represented a celebration of life, which was seen as a cycle of birth and death. According to Bakhtin, the essence of the grotesque stands in its radical ambiguity, the simultaneous pushing of two opposite forces: a force of denial and resizing of identity and its hierarchies of constituted values, and another force of rebirth and creation. The satire on power goes through their exaggerated representation, which is deformed and hyperbolic at the point that it brings to the loss of identity in order to promote a process of *becoming*.

For instance, in Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) the protagonist is a young, white, middle-class, heterosexual British man who moves to America for a job as Professor at the University of New York, and after having impregnated and pushed into abortion a young woman, Leilah, with whom he had previously established a relationship based on sexual domination and sexual submission where he was the dominator, he himself is surgically transformed into a biological woman by the parthenogenetic community of women in Beulah and is almost impregnated himself with a sample of his own sperm. The grotesque body is overstated, it loses the boundaries that are necessary to define it, underlining its defectiveness and carnivalesque configuration. A hyperbolic body is the ultimate image of the disharmony between the subject and the world. It is a body in progress, disarticulated, patchworked and altered in its components and organs; Rabelais tended mainly to evidence the biological and reproductive functions of the body, as they represented for him an idea of continuity and life itself, while these biological functions are, both in Carter and Winterson, mocked by the reassignment of them, while the body becomes "a blank page". With the idea of the grotesque body, what is irreversibly questioned is the integral, serious, universalistic and monolithic concept of Man. At the same time, Mary Russo's study on *The Female Grotesque* (1994) has been a useful theoretical tool to re-interpret the female grotesque monster not only as Bakhtin represented it, in her pregnant representation, but rather considering the female grotesque through centuries as the perfect expression of heterogeneity and an embodied resistance to Norm.

Hence, as it will be possible to observe, the discourse on anti-normative, monstrous and grotesque corporeality intersects, or rather, posits monstrous corporealities within the spaces and scenarios from the novels and short stories that I have examined. This situatedness, which takes into account poststructuralist philosophy (e.g. Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Rosi Braidotti, Judith Butler, Angela Jones), cultural anthropology, queer and feminist criticism, aimed at identifying in the dichotomy between centre and margin a correspondence between the normative subject, who inhabits the centre, and the anti-normative, or monstrous, subject, who occupies the spaces of liminality. Nevertheless, I will show how in the novels and short stories that I analysed the margin is transformed both into a place of resistance, from which the monster can rise to the condition of subject, and places where the common law of the Norm is suspended, and where consequently even the normative subject is forced to go through a process of deconstruction of the Self.

With these theoretical assumptions in mind, the main aim of my thesis will be to show the continuity of an intertextual discourse on eccentric corporeality, and how the topic of monstrosity has been explored with different approaches, depending on the authorial perspective, from Mary Shelley to Angela Carter, to Jeanette Winterson, and the authors' socio-cultural and historical context. The following hypotheses will be tested: <

1. By using a Gothic novel as *Frankenstein* as a starting point, and by analysing its literary heritage in Carter and Winterson with a queer and feminist approach, it is possible to notice how Gothic fiction has always been a touchstone and a testing ground for alternative figurations of identities, sexualities and genders, which have resisted

to the Western dominant ideology by constituting a category of «Abnormal, Unnatural, Sinful, Sick.»⁷

2. The *mise-en-scene* of the sexualised body is, for Carter, a critique to the fetishizing model of representation on which the aesthetical demands on bodies in capitalistic society are generated.

3. The relationship of power between the Creator and the Creature primarily developed by Mary Shelley is here allusively recontextualised both in the works of Carter and Winterson, giving space to a power-play between the gender roles of male and female, whose overcoming stands in the consideration that these roles are performative.

4. There is a correlation between the isolation of abject bodies and the landscapes in which they move, as well as there is a connection between the promotion of a Normative corporeity and the urbanised industrialist and hyper-technological spaces. These anti-normative spaces in which the abject figurations move or aim to must be seen as *anti-topoi*, spaces of social relegation which are at the same time connected with the mainstream, legitimised, capitalistic space of integration for the Subject. In Carter, as well as in Winterson, the body is a tool for mirroring the space and the social dynamics in which they are englobed, or from where they are rejected.

5. Looking at the social and historical background in which each author is located, the discourse on monstrosity depends on and varies from the age in which grotesqueness has been developed by each literary work.

⁷ Rubin, Gayle S. *Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality*. Routledge, 2007.

Chapter One

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations Regarding Monstrosity, the Grotesque and Abjection from a Queer and Transfeminist Approach

1.1 The Grotesque and Monstrosity: *Ubuesque* and Ab/normality Binaries

In this section I would like to introduce the theoretical-methodological apparatus on which my investigation into the representation of the monstrous and the grotesque in English literature through the works of the British authors Mary Shelley, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson is based. Referring to poststructuralist thought and feminist and queer theories, I will try to trace a diachronic development of the transformation of the discourse on the categories of monstrosity and grotesqueness, starting from the references to these concepts in social history and cultural anthropology. There has always been a line between what establishes what is normal, and therefore an integral part of society, and what is abnormal, and therefore to be ostracised from society. Abnormality, however, exists and resists as a concept to consolidate the image of the norm and what it represents.

Michel Foucault's definition of monstrosity from the 1974-1975 course that he taught at the Collège de France, recollected later in an essay entitled *Abnormal*⁸, can serve as the starting point to one of this study's central concepts. It is not a coincidence that this course was held the same year as Foucault's publication of his essay *Discipline and Punish*⁹, wherein he develops his theory of a "microphysics of power" and reinterprets Jeremy Bentham's idea of the *Panopticon*. Both of these concepts will inform later analysis. – In both the course and *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault investigates the historical, juridical, cultural, and social origins of diversity between the Subject and what is defined by 19th century's positivism as "a-normal". However, before describing Foucault's definition of monstrosity, I would like to underline the fact that his course began

⁸ Foucault, Michel, *Abnormal: lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*. Vol. 2. Macmillan, 2003.

⁹ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and punish*. A. Sheridan, Tr., Paris, FR, Gallimard, 1975.

with the analysis of two psychiatric evaluations. This detail is fundamental to my exploration of monstrosity, as it demonstrates, by means of two practical case studies, how the cooperation between the institutions of power, psychiatry and the law can generate abjection and otherness.

The first case analysed by Foucault is from 1955 (*L’Affaire Denise Labbé- [Jacques] Algarron*, Paris 1956) and contends with is the case of a woman, L., and her partner, A., who allegedly pushed her to kill her own daughter. The experts who analysed the case started from the hypothesis that A. may have influenced L. to such a point that pushed the woman to kill her own daughter. This hypothesis is supported by a diachronic investigation of A.’s life, which involved a difficult childhood, political militancy, petty crimes, and to a certain extent ‘bovarism’, ‘alcibiadism’, ‘dongiovannism’ and ‘super-humanism’.¹⁰ All of these aspects, coupled with an ability to manipulate, led A. to influence L. Consequently, L. adopted A.’s personality traits in an exaggerated and tragic way. When A. began to bring up the necessity that a couple do something extraordinary in order to establish an unbreakable bond between them, L. started contemplating the possibility of murdering her young daughter, Catherine. The protagonist from the second case, which also took place in 1955, is X. Experts describe him as being a homosexual since the age of twelve or thirteen and characterise him as being «completely immoral, cynical, and even a chatterbox. Three thousand years ago he would certainly have been an inhabitant of Sodom, and the heavenly flames would have justly punished him for his vice»¹¹. Thus, the experts are reiterating a moral judgement of X. based on his sexual conduct, and presenting “historical evidence” of his immorality which brought him to commit his crime, blackmail. Experts’ interpretation of X.’s homosexuality proves, like their analysis of A.’s life, the protagonists’ unavoidable fate as criminals. This inclination by jurisdictions to look for a kind of ‘criminal determinism’ is the symptom of the need for power to identify sexual deviation and ‘unnatural’ behaviours as the matrix of evil, and thus of the criminal attitude of the individual.

¹⁰ Foucault, Michel, *Abnormal: lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*. Vol. 2. Macmillan, 2003, p. 2

¹¹ Ivi, p. 5

Regarding the relationship between the truth and justice, despite the experts having approached the cases scientifically, Foucault states that this correlation is applied arbitrarily to the criminal subjects, because

[...] this truth-justice relationship [...] is, after all, one of the most immediate and fundamental presuppositions of all judicial, political, and critical discourse that there is an essential affiliation between stating the truth and the practice of justice. Where the institution appointed to govern justice and the institutions qualified to express the truth encounter each other, or more concisely, where the court and the expert encounter each other, where judicial institutions and medical knowledge, or scientific knowledge in general, intersect, statements are formulated having the status of true discourses with considerable judicial effects. However, these statements also have the curious property of being foreign to all, even the most elementary, rules for the formation of scientific discourse, as well as being foreign to the rules of law and of being, in the strict sense, grotesque, like the texts I have just read.¹²

According to this method, the construction of a criminal, whose major fault is their desire for transgression, takes place through scientific discourse:

the value of psychiatric expertise is often, if not always, that of demonstrating potential criminality, or rather, the potential for the offense the individual is accused of. The purpose of describing his delinquent character, the basis of his criminal or para-criminal conduct since childhood, is clearly to facilitate transition from being accused to being convicted.¹³

Since, for Foucault, the subject is present in the form of desire, in the view of the experts the criminal moves following what Foucault defines «the fundamental position of illegality in the logic or movement of desire»¹⁴. Consequently, crime is the failure of the subject to resist following an abject desire, considering that «the subject's desire is closely connected with transgression of the law. His desire is fundamentally bad. But this criminal desire-and this is still regularly found in these experiences [rectius: expert opinions]- is always the correlate of a law, a breakdown, a weakness or incapacity of the subject»¹⁵, and being a criminal,

¹² Ivi, p. 11

¹³ Ivi, p. 21

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

according to these psychiatric statements, means being an anti-subject, an imperfect identity.

The desire of crime, then, is always correlate of a law, a breakdown, a weakness or incapacity of the subject. This accounts for the regular appearance of notions such as "lack of intelligence," "failure," "inferiority," "poverty," "ugliness," "immaturity," "defective development," "infantilism," "behavioral archaism," and "instability."¹⁶ This brings the criminal subject to become a «juridically indiscernible personality over whom [...] justice has no jurisdiction.» We are no more dealing with a legal subject but rather with a legal «object of technology and knowledge of rectification, readaptation, reinsertion, and correction.» This brings the criminal to lose their status of subject and become a juridical element of investigation and application of the Law, and the psychiatric report has, first of all, together with the psychiatrist themselves, the function of a judgement and facilitates the passage from being accused to being sentenced.¹⁷

With this in mind, there is a relevant digression by Foucault on the idea of *grotesque* related with power, which I consider specular to my discourse which will regard an analysis of what is power and by the means of which techniques power defines the bodies while creating spaces of inclusion or exclusion. For Foucault, a discourse or an individual can be defined as “grotesque” when they

can have effects of power that their intrinsic qualities should disqualify them from having. The grotesque, or, if you prefer, the “Ubu-esque,” is [...] a precise category, or, [...] a precise category of historico-political analysis, that would be the category of the grotesque or Ubuesque. Ubu-esque terror, grotesque sovereignty, or, in starker terms, the maximization of effects of power on the basis of the disqualification of the one who produces them.¹⁸

The grotesque is a “cog in the mechanism of power”.¹⁹ As Foucault describes, the grotesque establishes the arbitrariness on which power is founded. However,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 11

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 12

this arbitrariness, as he goes on to say, has always been a component of governments, epitomised by ancient Roman society, which had in the figure of the Emperor the paradigm of grotesque jurisdiction and sovereignty.²⁰ However, he goes on, this arbitrariness has always been a component of governments, epitomised by the Ancient Roman society, which had in the figure of the Emperor the embodied paradigm of grotesque jurisdiction and sovereignty²¹. In addition to this, Foucault exposes the “administrative” and bureaucratic version of the grotesque which has established itself as an essential feature of Western society since the 19th century «with its unavoidable effects of power». It is not merely “that kind of visionary perception of administration that we find in Balzac, Dostoyevsky, Courteline, or Kafka”, because for Foucault an individual possessed by grotesque power has the same validity as a mad charlatan in the Roman empire.²² Indeed, Foucault affirms that

the grotesque character of someone like Mussolini [whose Fascism was inspired by the aesthetics and idea of omnipotence of the Roman Empire] was absolutely inherent to the mechanism of power. Power provided itself with an image in which power derived from someone who was theatrically got up and depicted as a clown or a buffoon.²³

Nevertheless, denouncing power as grotesque does not diminish its inevitability, but rather emphasises its violence and influence on society, «which can function in its full rigor and at the extreme point of its rationality even when in the hands of someone who is effectively discredited».²⁴

In his second lecture, which took place on January 22, 1975, Foucault stresses the notion of anomaly, first introduced in the previous class. He goes on to analyse the figure of the “monster” from a “juridical-biological” perspective

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ivi, p. 13

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

being that, as he explains, there is the fundamental assumption that, for the normative society, the disorder of nature subverts the legal order. According to Foucault, there are three different “monsters”: the moral monster, the individual to be corrected and the masturbating child.²⁵ There is a different anamnesis and a different approach to the anomaly of each one of these three figures he quotes. While the moral monster reflects the notion of government and the figure of the tyrant, the individual to be corrected is a figure which was established around the 18th century with the aim of reabsorbing those who violate the morals and the law in the normative society. Finally, the third “moral monster”, the masturbating child regards the pathologizing of child sexuality that developed in psychiatry in the 19th century and was later validated by psychoanalysis during the first half of the 20th century.

However, the general consideration to take into account about the Foucauldian investigation on monstrosity is the fact that the monster exists to contradict the established law, on a juridic and social plan it represents the extreme point of infraction of law, at the point that its action, as its mere existence, collocates the monster outside the law.²⁶ Another *querelle* that Foucault attributes to 19th century science is the presumption of «discovering the core of monstrosity hidden behind little abnormalities, deviances, and irregularities», as, for instance, Cesare Lombroso²⁷ tried to classify delinquents vis-à-vis physiology, because monstrosity is nothing but «the major model of every little deviation. It is the principle of intelligibility of all the forms that circulate as the small change of abnormality.»²⁸

²⁵ Ivi, p. 55

²⁶ The notion of the agency of the monster in a space of otherness is included in the concept of 'heterotopia' theorized by Michel Foucault, which I explain better in the section 1.7 of this chapter.

²⁷ Foucault refers to Cesare Lombroso's study on criminal anthropology documented in *L'Uomo delinquente studiato in rapporto all'antropologia, alla medicina legale ed alle discipline carcerarie*, Milano, 1876, quoted in Foucault, Michel, *Abnormal. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-197*, 2003, p.76

²⁸ Ivi, p. 65

Later in the same lecture, Foucault quotes Roman law to support his juridical-historical discussion of abnormality. Foucault explains that there is an inseparable distinction between the two categories of monstrosity: the first being that of the *portentum*, meaning the class of deformity, disability and deficiency; the second is the monster in the strictest sense. I would like to use the definition of monstrosity provided by Foucault as a starting point for my thesis, as it introduces the type of approach that I aim to adopt, by means of the bibliographic apparatus made of literary case studies, criticism and methodology available to me. Thus, what is the monster, Foucault asks, in both the juridical and scientific tradition? And how does the definition of what is a monster change through history?

From the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century, the period that concerns us, the monster is essentially a mixture. It is the mixture of two realms, the animal and the human: the man with the head of an ox, the man with a bird's feet-monsters. It is the blending, the mixture of two species: the pig with a sheep's head is a monster. It is the mixture of two individuals: the person who has two heads and one body or two bodies and one head is a monster. It is the mixture of two sexes: the person who is both male and female is a monster. It is a mixture of life and death: the fetus born with a morphology that means it will not be able to live but that nonetheless survives for some minutes or days is a monster. Finally, it is a mixture of forms: the person who has neither arms nor legs, like a snake, is a monster. Consequently, the monster is the transgression of natural limits, the transgression of classifications, of the table, and of the law as table: this is actually what is involved in monstrosity. However, I do not think that it is this alone that constitutes the monster. For medieval thought, and definitely for seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought, the breach of natural law is not enough to constitute monstrosity. Monstrosity requires a transgression of the natural limit, of the law-table, to fall under, or at any rate challenge, an interdiction of civil and religious or divine law. There is monstrosity only when the confusion comes up against, overturns, or disturbs civil, canon, or religious law. The Abnormal difference between disability and monstrosity is revealed at the meeting point, the point of friction, between a breach of the natural lawtable and a breach of the law instituted by God or by society, at the point where these two breaches of law come together.²⁹

Another consideration that validates this thought about the image of the monstrous figure as a scapegoat for the subversion of social, cultural and religious values is confirmed by Foucault in reference to the experience of hermaphrodites throughout legal history. He argues that each historical era had,

²⁹ Ivi, p. 62

at least from a legislative and medical point of view, privileged forms of monstrosity. The two case studies used by Foucault for his January 22nd, 1975 lecture, describe two trials of women accused of violating morality and reproductive laws on account of hermaphroditism.

During the *Ancien Régime*, intersex individuals were viewed as monsters and burnt at the stake, as was the case of Antide Collas, the last French hermaphrodite to be burnt alive in 1599. Fundamental to Foucault's discussion it refers the story of the so called "hermaphrodite of Rouen", as it clearly delineates how the monster is pictured as a "counter-order to the rule of nature"³⁰ and to human gender roles, clearly binarized in masculine and feminine. Thus, if one has both sexes, they must be seen as an act of counter-nature and a violation to the binary system defended by the normative patriarchal and medical system. Intersex individuals, in this case, respect their monstrous design expressed earlier by Foucault: they put a strain on nature, they constitute a defiance to God and society.

The protagonist from the second case investigated by Foucault, Anne Grandjean, was sued in 1765 as an impostor woman in a male's disguise because of her intersex nature. In both of these cases, there is the reconfirmation of the sentence from the case of the hermaphrodite of Rouen, as well as no mixture of sexes, no male nature coexisting with a female one and therefore only an imperfect body, an extravagance, an imperfection, a mistake of nature. As Foucault explains, this will be the approach adopted from the 19th century onwards and that will strengthen the notion of monstrosity associated with biology, corporeality, gender, sexuality and society that constitutes a paradigm of scientific analysis for Positivism ³¹.

As previously mentioned, there is always an absoluteness in the practices adopted by power in the law and the ways in which these practices are applied to individuals in order to regulate, control, and repress their actions and

³⁰ Ivi, p. 71

³¹ Ibid.

behaviour. This tyranny manifests by means of pain, torture, and death sentences as a way to punish criminals. Indeed, there was no distinction made in the 17th and 18th centuries between the notions of the monster and the criminal, until the monster was identified by 19th century medicine. In the 19th century, there is an inversion to this syllogism: while the previous consideration was that a criminal is a monster, the subsequent supposition is that every criminal is a monster and every monster is a criminal, one that is linked to the first two case studies that Foucault introduces in his course. In these two case studies it is evident how the psychiatric experts tasked with analysing the cases were looking for elements intrinsic to the past conduct of the subjects that may encapsulate their whole life as criminals.

Punishment is, for Foucault, the revenge of the monarch who, during trial, subverts based on new ideas and the application of force against the criminal, the ceremonial reversal of the crime. We can then observe again how the arbitrariness of the crime and its punishment establishes, by means of power, the subject, the abjection, and the monster. On the contrary, the superiority of the power that punishes the crime and the body is such as to annihilate the criminal/abject in the punishing action, which can be either a sentence to torture and death or ostracism if related to justice. Furthermore, it can either be social exclusion or the creation of the dissimilarity between the heteronormative subject and the anti-normative abject.³²

Taking into account this binary between Subject as synonym for norm and deviation as a synonym for anti-norm and how these binary distinction are shaped according to sexual conducts, Gayle Rubin affirms that «a radical theory of sex must identify, describe, explain, and denounce erotic injustice and sexual

³² One field of study that has been emerging in recent years that takes into account the relationship between diversity and inclusion is disability studies, which aims to develop the concept of disability and its representation as a historical, cultural, social and political process. Although I did not focus on this approach specifically, during the profiling of my project I found it useful to read the following articles: Hughes, Bill. "Wounded/monstrous/abject: A critique of the disabled body in the sociological imaginary." *Disability & Society* 24.4, 2009, pp. 399-410; and Godden, Richard H., and Asa Simon Mittman. "Embodied Difference: Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman." *Monstrosity, Disability, and the Posthuman in the Medieval and Early Modern World*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019, pp. 3-31.

oppression» which «requires a convincing critical language that can convey the barbarity of sexual persecution»³³.

In my thesis, I argue that this theory of sex must include also a reflection on corporeality and how bodies are not only given the role of witnesses of a dichotomic relationship between the Normal and the Abnormal, but also power and voice to contrast the axiom of a sexual essentialism, which is, as Rubin clarifies, «the idea that sex is a natural force that exists prior to social life and shapes institutions», and which is «embedded in the folk wisdoms of Western societies, which consider sex to be eternally unchanging, asocial, and transhistorical.»³⁴

As for the body politics³⁵, Science has separated bodies and identities through psychiatry, medicine and psychology, forging the essentialist image of sex as a property of individuals, which resides in their hormones and psyches and which may be constructed physiologically or psychologically³⁶. On the other hand, in his *History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault rejects the essentialist and positivist idea of erotic desire as a pre-existing biological entity, and argues that it is constituted, together with new sexualities,³⁷ in the course of historically specific social practices. Foucault emphasises «the generative aspects of the social organization of sex rather than its repressive elements by pointing out that the new sexualities are constantly produced, pointing to a major discontinuity between kinship-based systems of sexuality and more modern forms».³⁸

³³ Rubin, Gayle S. *Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality*. Routledge, 2007, p. 149

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ With the term 'body politics' I mainly refer to the practices that society and the powers that regulate it enact in order to control the bodily agency, the relationship between the individual and society and the ways in which the individual experience of the body must result functional to power and its consumerist, legislative and economic mechanisms.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Meaning any sexual identity or sexual orientation which differs from heterosexual and heteronormative sexuality and cisgender identity.

³⁸ Rubin, Gayle S. *Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality*. Routledge, 2007, p. 149

Furthermore, in more recent studies, Rubin recognises as well the importance of the constructivist philosophy and the new studies on sexual politics, which have given space to a quarrel about biology and desire, or rather about culture and nature:

The new scholarship on sexual behaviour has given sex a history and created a constructivist alternative to sexual essentialism. Underlying this body of work is an assumption that sexuality is constituted in society and history, not biologically ordained. This does not mean the biological capacities are not prerequisites for human sexuality. It does mean that human sexuality is not comprehensible in purely biological terms. Human organisms with human brains are necessary for human cultures, but no examination of the body or its parts can explain the nature and variety of human social systems. The belly's hunger gives no clues as to the complexities of cuisine. The body, the brain, the genitalia, and the capacity for language are necessary for human sexuality. But they do not determine its content, its experiences, or its institutional forms. Moreover, we never encounter the body unmediated by the meanings that cultures give to it.³⁹

In other words, according to Rubin's assertion, a body cannot be read as a unit discernible from its context. This context can be social or cultural and may make it impossible to discuss the politics of race or gender as long as these concepts are thought of as biological facts rather than social constructs. According to Rubin, «modern Western societies appraise sex acts according to a hierarchical system of sexual value. Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top erotic pyramid. Clamouring below are unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by most other heterosexuals.»⁴⁰ Apart from the stigmatization of masturbation as a parasexual practice used to sexual intercourse, Rubin attributes to the 19th century the (de)merit of pathologizing of non-heteronormative sexual identities through science, relegated to liminal suburban spaces of sexual promiscuity, much as the ballrooms and the gay clubs will be for late-20th century United States. Specifically, the hierarchies of sexual value, be they religious, psychiatric or favoured, rationalise which sexuality is privileged, and which is deviant.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ivi, p. 151

Stable, long-term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the groups at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sadomasochists, sex workers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries.⁴¹

For Rubin, these parameters of tolerance and taboo around sexuality derive from a Biblical culture rooted in traditional societal customs, in order to prevent non-reproductive deviances such as incest, homosexuality, and bestiality. While quoting Foucault, Rubin states that

when medicine and psychiatry acquired extensive powers over sexuality, they were less concerned with unsuitable mates than with unfit forms of desire. If taboos against incest best characterized kinship systems of sexual organization, then the shift to an emphasis on taboos against masturbation was more apposite to the newer systems organized around qualities of erotic experience⁴².

In *Thinking Sex*, Rubin employs two images to graphically represent the boundaries between what is termed “the charmed circle” and “the outer limits”, as the first of these pictures says, and the line of best and worst sexuality, defined by an array of brickwalls indicating the three gradual steps from best to worst.

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 151

⁴² Ibid.; see Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume 1: An Introduction, Pantheon, New York, 1978

The charmed circle:

Good, Normal, Natural, Blessed Sexuality

- Heterosexual
- Married
- Monogamous
- Procreative
- Non-commercial
- In pairs
- In a relationship
- Same generation
- In private
- No pornography
- Bodies only
- Vanilla



The outer limits:

Bad, Abnormal, Unnatural, Damned Sexuality

- Homosexual
- Unmarried
- Promiscuous
- Non-procreative
- Commercial
- Alone or in groups
- Casual
- Cross-generational
- In public
- Pornography
- With manufactured objects
- Sadomasochistic

FIGURE 1. The sex hierarchy: the charmed circle vs. the outer limits

Figure 1.

Figure 9.1 diagrams a general version of the sexual value system. According to this system, sexuality that is 'good', 'normal', and 'natural' should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is 'bad', 'abnormal', or 'unnatural'. Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in 'public', or at least in the bushes or the baths. It may involve the use of pornography, fetish objects, sex toys, or unusual roles.⁴³

⁴³ Ibid.

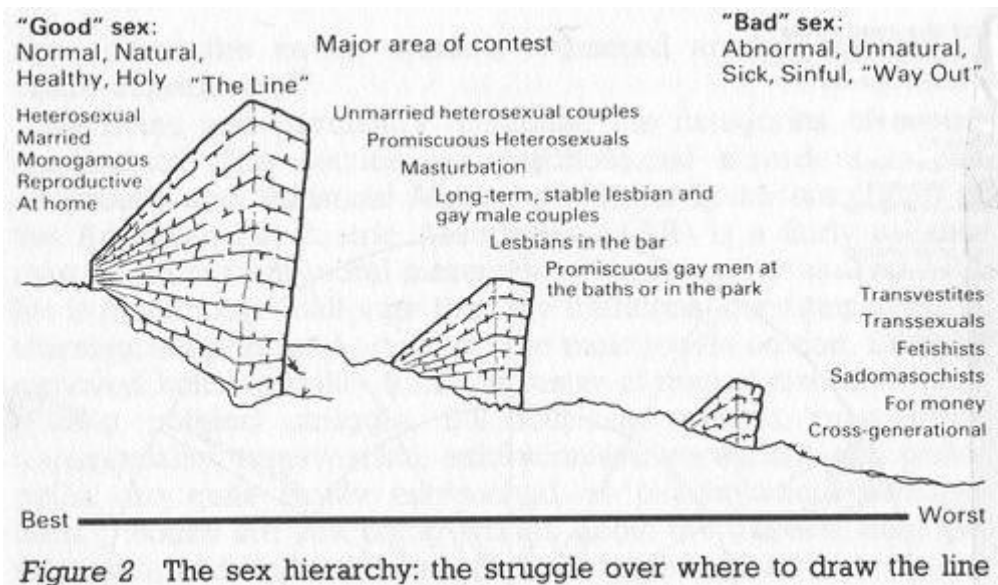


Figure 2.

Figure 9.2 diagrams another aspect of the sexual hierarchy: the **need to draw and maintain an imaginary line between good and bad sex**. Most of the discourses on sex, be they religious, psychiatric, popular, or political, delimit a very small portion of human sexual capacity as sanctifiable, safe, healthy, mature, legal, or politically correct. The **'line'** distinguishes these from all other erotic behaviours, which are understood to be the work of the devil, dangerous, psychopathological, infantile, or politically reprehensible. Arguments are then conducted over 'where to draw the line', and to determine what other activities, if any, may be permitted to cross over into acceptability. All these models assume a domino theory of sexual peril. The line appears to stand between sexual order and chaos. It expresses the fear that if anything is permitted to cross this erotic DMZ, the barrier against scary sex will crumble and something unspeakable will skitter across.⁴⁴

My analysis on grotesque, monstrosity and spaces of liminality is based on a queer, situated and transfeminist perspective, and to do so I believe it is helpful to start from the graphic metaphor by Rubin which is the array of brickwalls, drawn while adopting a prospect from the nearest one, symbolising the 'Normal, Natural, Healthy, Holy' to the most far, the wall of 'Abnormal, Unnatural, Sick, Sinful, Way Out'⁴⁵. "The Line," which establishes the dichotomy between the tolerable and the intolerable, or between subject and abject, is a representation of boundaries, which are populated inside and outside the restricted areas either by good or bad sexualities, or by good or bad corporealities.

⁴⁴ Ibid., bold type in the original

⁴⁵ See Figure 2.

1.2 Intertextuality, Postmodernism and the Bakhtinian Carnival

Before contextualising the comparative relationship between the model of monstrosity designed by Mary Shelley and the later exploration of alternative monstrous and grotesque conceptions in the works by Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson, it is necessary to elaborate on postmodernism and intertextuality as a central theoretical framework. These literary, cultural, and stylistic frameworks will reveal themselves to be fundamental not only in drawing a connection between Gothic literature and speculative fiction from the 19th century to contemporary feminist writing, but also in order to constitute a valid tool for contextualization of those themes and discourses on body politics and monstrosity that will derive from these case studies.

The French-Bulgarian semiologist and philosopher Julia Kristeva first used the word “intertextuality” in her essay *Word, Dialogue and Novel* as a reference to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of intertextuality. Though Kristeva was the first to coin the term, the idea had been previously investigated by poststructuralist criticism as a universally adopted phenomenon of communicative interconnections between a text and context'.⁴⁶ Consequently, Mikhail Bakhtin is the starting point for Kristeva’s redefinition of intertextuality, as was also observed by Graham Allen who claims that 'the Bakhtinian notion of the dialogic has been rephrased within Kristeva’s semiotic attention to text textuality and their relation to ideological structures' ⁴⁷. Although both Bakhtin and Kristeva conclude that texts cannot be considered as detached entities from the socio-cultural background in which they have been conceived and elaborated, Kristeva focuses on the semiotic aspect related to text and textuality.

Bakhtin’s notion of ‘dialogism’, together with its specular notions of ‘polyphony’ and ‘heteroglossia’, is developed in his essay on Fedor Dostoevsky’s novels. Dialogism and polyphony represent two concepts deeply interconnected with

⁴⁶ Raj, P. Prayer Elmo. "Text/Texts: Interrogating Julia Kristeva's Concept of Intertextuality." *Ars Artium* 3, 2015, p. 77

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 36

each other. Graham Roberts⁴⁸ defines 'dialogue' in the Bakhtinian glossary as «the basic trope in all of Bakhtin's thought» stating that «there is no existence, no meaning, no word or thought that does not enter into dialogue or 'dialogic' ([lit.] "dialogicheskii") relations with the other, that does not exhibit intertextuality in both time and space»⁴⁹.

Roberts goes on to specify that Bakhtin considers the form of 'monologue' as denying the dialogic nature of existence, refusing to be recognised an addressee, as it is typical of authoritarian regimes. Polyphony, then, defines the coexistence of more voices, each one with its heterogeneous vision of the world, whereas the voices are interacting with each other in a dialogue which has no final scope of predominance the one upon the other. Heteroglossia (the Russian 'raznorechie' literally means 'different-speech-ness'), refers to the conflict between 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal', 'official' and 'unofficial' discourses within the same national language⁵⁰.

However, heteroglossia should not be confused with polyphony, since polyphony is 'used by Bakhtin primarily to describe Dostoevsky's multi-voiced novels, whereby author's and heroes' discourses interact on equal terms' while 'heteroglossia, on the other hand, foregrounds the clash of antagonistic social forces'⁵¹. Hence, the Dostoevskyan polyphony is useful in order to better understand the expression of a condition of precarity, the impermanence of certainties within reality and society, and the negation of any totalising perspective. As Gerardo Rodríguez Salas remarks, for Bakhtin, heteroglossia constitutes the condition of necessary contradiction of different voices.⁵² Polyphony and heteroglossia are contradictory terms, «an eternal harmony of

⁴⁸ Roberts, Graham, and Pam Morris, *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Voloshinov*, London ; New York, E. Arnold, 1994, p. 246.

⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 246

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 248

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 249

⁵² Rodríguez Salas, Gerardo. 2009. *Katherine Mansfield: el posmodernismo incipiente de una modernista renegada*, Editorial Verbum, Madrid, 2009, p. 134

submerged voices or as their unceasing and irreconcilable quarrel.»⁵³ This aspect gives different voices in a text the possibility of establishing a dialogue, which occurs between the dominant/canonical voice and the marginal one⁵⁴, with the marginal voice always subordinate to the canonical.

However, the polyphonic novel cannot be eradicated from its socio-historical analysis due to the fact that it represents the evolution of a long literary tradition rooted in the concept of the carnivalesque. Carnival⁵⁵, in fact, represents for Bakhtin the historical and cultural experiment of a dialogue of the marginal with the dominant culture.⁵⁶

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.⁵⁷

Likewise, the suspension of hierarchical differences, or 'ranks', during carnival was particularly relevant seeing as

rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full *regalia* of his calling, rank, and merits to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the mediaeval social order were exceptionally

⁵³ Roberts, Graham, and Pam Morris, *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, and Voloshinov*, E. Arnold, London; New York, 1994, p. 92

⁵⁴ Rodríguez Salas, Gerardo, *Katherine Mansfield: el posmodernismo incipiente de una modernista renegada*, Editorial Verbum, Madrid, 2009, p. 134

⁵⁵ The term Carnival comes from Latin: "carnem levare" as it indicated the banquet held on the last day of Carnival (Shrove Tuesday, also known as Mardi Gras), just before the period of abstinence and fasting of Lent which precedes Holy Easter. It represents, Bakhtin says, the embodiment of the European folk festival par excellence, which is independent from Church and State and is tolerated by these two institutions. The origin of this festival can be traced back to ancient Greece and the Dionysian festivals, and in Rome with the Saturnalia, and it has undergone over the centuries through a gradual process of hybridisation with Christian culture and the Catholic religion.

⁵⁶ Ivi, p. 131

⁵⁷ Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaïlovich, and Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and his world*. Vol. 341, Indiana University Press, 1984, p.7

strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The Utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind. This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival a special type of communication impossible in everyday life⁵⁸.

We are therefore able to observe the existence of a “dialogue” in carnivalesque culture between the canonical and marginal points of view. The latter takes advantage of the temporal suspension of normality and hierarchies in order to acquire a voice of its own.

Consequently, intertextuality occurs when there is an established dialogue between a hypotext, which represents the dominant/canonical culture, and a non-canonical, marginal text. Alternatively, Kristeva considers the «word within the space of texts,» wherein the word itself represents a signifier for literary intellection, intersectioning language, a practice of thought, with space, «the volume within which signification articulates itself.»⁵⁹ Kristeva identifies three dimensions of textual space or “coordinates of dialogue,” which are the 1) writing subject, 2) addressee, and 3) exterior texts. According to Kristeva, a word’s status is defined both horizontally--by the relationship of the word in the text with the writing subject and the addressee--and vertically--as the text refers synchronically and diachronically to a literary corpus--with the addressee being part of the book’s discursive universe only as a discourse itself, bringing to life an important fact:

he [the addressee] is included within a book’s discursive universe only as discourse itself. He thus fuses with this other discourse, this other book, in relation to which the writer has written his own text. Hence horizontal axis (subject - addressee) and the vertical axis (text - context) coincide, bringing to light an important fact: each word (text) is an intersection of word [sic] (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read. In Bakhtin’s work, these two axes, which he calls dialogue and ambivalence, are not clearly distinguished. Yet, what appears as a lack of rigour is in fact an insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Kristeva, Julia, *The Kristeva reader*. Columbia University Press, 1986, p. 37

intertextuality replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least double.⁶⁰

Kristeva's theorization of intertextuality reaches a consistent theoretical development in the 1980s with the fundamental contribution of the French literary critic Gerard Genette to the field of comparative literature, namely with his work *Palimpsests. Literature in the Second Degree*, published in 1982. As Gerald Prince specifies in his foreword to the 1997 American edition of *Palimpsests*, what Genette expresses throughout his work is that «the object of poetics is not the (literary) text but its textual transcendence» and that transcendence is due to «the palimpsestuous nature of texts»⁶¹. The adjective 'palimpsestuous', which was coined for Genette by Philippe Lejeune. Genette employs the label of "transtextuality" to signify the interrelationship between different texts, i.e. the «textual transcendence of the text [...] At the time of writing (13 October 1981), [Genette is] inclined to recognise five types of transtextual relationships», which are:

- 1) **intertextuality** (defined in a more restrictive sense than Kristeva's definition as a relationship of co-presence between two texts among several texts: that is to say, intertextuality is the actual presence of a text within another one;
- 2) **paratextuality**, i.e. 'what enables a text to become a book and to be offered to its readers and, more generally, to the public';⁶²
- 3) **metatextuality**, i.e. the commentary relationship with a text;
- 4) **architextuality**, i.e. 'the entire set of general or transcendent categories-types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres-from which emerges each singular text'⁶³

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Genette, Gerard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the second degree*. Vol. 8. University of Nebraska Press, 1997, ix

⁶² Ivi, p.1

⁶³ Ibid.

5) hypertextuality, the last and most interesting for Genette's analysis, as by hypertextuality he means «any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary.»⁶⁴

The intertextual literary device of citation, therefore, has become one of the recurring elements of contemporary literature, although this does not mean that citation has not always been used by authors as intertextual practice even before contemporary age. In fact, as Vita Fortunati explains in her essay *Intertestualità e citazione fra Modernismo e Postmodernismo*⁶⁵, the practice of citation belongs to both Modernism and Postmodernism albeit the existence of different ideological aims and socio-cultural backgrounds between these two paradigms. Nevertheless, a wider and more diversified model of postmodernism culminated by differently influencing the literary works from these two different literary periods.

The mechanism of citation, in fact, is very evident in Modernism, where the citation or the mechanism of allusion evidences the paradoxical situation of the Modernist writer who, on one hand, wishes to innovate, experiment, destroy, while on the other hand recognises that, in order to accomplish with this work of demolition of tradition one must consider that very tradition coming from the past. This approach, of course, will be shared by feminist criticism, which will ask its members: where does the change come from? How can we create the 'New'? This is what, for instance, asks Rosi Braidotti, answering that the new comes from creating and revisiting and consuming the old until the ending point of it, as difference is the result of infinite repetitions. The discursive practices, the imaginary and ideological identifications are written in/on the bodies (where 'bodies' can be read as a complementary metaphor for 'texts'), and are constitutive of embodied subjectivities (where 'embodied subjectivities' can be read as a complementary metaphor for 'world literature/human thought'). Thus, according to Braidotti, «women who yearn

⁶⁴ Ivi, p. 5

⁶⁵ Fortunati, Vita. "Intertestualità e citazione fra Modernismo e Postmodernismo." *Leitmotiv 2*, 2002, pp. 87-96.

for change cannot shed their old skins like snakes»⁶⁶. It is Braidotti's invitation to consider the literary canon as a reference to take into account in order to generate new literary models which may constitute the new canon moving forward from the tradition. As Fortunati explains, «the author quotes in order to reaffirm the *auctoritas*, to find a confirmation within the worthy voice of another author to what he/she wants to claim; at the same time, though, he/she quotes with the intention of mocking and dethroning the official language *auctoritas*»⁶⁷).

Thus, the canonical and modernist authors employ the practice of citation, with each one adopting different approaches- i.e. T.S. Eliot sees the past as a still monument against the debacle of modern civilization, while James Joyce actualises the past as a "document" for a continuous methodical parody- convinced that there can still be a confrontation with tradition. By contrast, the practice of recycling narrative material from the past, as is done in postmodernism, is proof of an distressed awareness that the artist cannot write anything but what has already been written. Nevertheless, this impossibility of a peer confrontation with the past offers postmodern authors the chance to deconstruct the sanctity of the canon, or rather, to manipulate it. However, this process of de-legitimising traditions not, as has already been mentioned, a prerogative only of the postmodern era; just as there is no strict or immediate separation between the literary past and this postmodernist era, as shown by Hassan Ihab, seeing as «history is a palimpsest, and culture is permeated to time past, time present, and time future. We are all, I suspect, a little Victorian, Modern, and Postmodern at once»⁶⁸. Accordingly, Postmodernism represents a process of "de-legitimation" of the canon and the "Postmodern science" is the search for instability and contradiction. As Jean-François Lyotard states in *The Postmodern condition*,

⁶⁶ Braidotti, Rosi. "Becoming woman: Or sexual difference revisited." *Theory, culture & society* 20.3, 2003, pp. 43-64.

⁶⁷ Fortunati, Vita. "Intertestualità e citazione fra Modernismo e Postmodernismo.", p. 87

⁶⁸ Hassan, Ihab. *The postmodern turn essays in postmodern theory and culture*, Ohio State University Press, 1987, p. 88

the pragmatics of postmodern scientific knowledge per se has little affinity with the quest for performativity. Science does not expand by means of the positivism of efficiency. The opposite is true: working on a proof means searching for and "inventing" counterexamples, in other words, the unintelligible; supporting an argument means looking for a "paradox" and legitimating it with new rules in the games of reasoning⁶⁹.

However, it is important to clarify that there exists a fraction of feminism which considers postmodernism, as maintained by Elaine Showalter, a movement which is still dominated by masculinist culture, and an instrument for the replication of a patriarchal culture. Thus, postmodernism represents a movement which is of no use to female narrative models.

My approach to Postmodernism in this work refers to a Postmodernism that, differently and divergently from a male Postmodernist post-Barthes-movement, establishes *the anxiety of influence* (Harold Bloom⁷⁰) and the "*mort de l'auteur*" (Roland Barthes) both referring to a male canon, but also taking into account the female and feminist literary tradition. The notions of literary canon and authoriality work differently for the "female author", as the male Postmodern critics, as Braidotti states, declared the death of the female author without letting her the opportunity for vindicating her own literary history. However, there is a branch of feminist intellectualism and literary critique that, starting from the recognition of an epistemological value to post-structuralism and Postmodernism, has seen in the *mort de l'auteur* (recognised as the male, white, privileged, heterosexual subject) the chance for a renewal of the authorial function, leaving space to the voice of women, LGBTQAI+ identities, non-white subjects, and other marginalised groups⁷¹

Having considered these premises, can postmodernism be considered a literary, cultural, and social movement that implies a negotiation with the past and its political issues? Is it a political action or an apolitical intellectual whim?

⁶⁹ Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 54

⁷⁰ Bloom, Harold. *The anxiety of influence: A theory of poetry*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1997.

⁷¹ Eagleton, Mary. *Working with feminist criticism*. Blackwell Publishing, 1996, pp. 65-77

Linda Hutcheon clarifies that there is indeed a political implication within the postmodern movement and, as Rodriguez Salas explains, it differs from the limitation to formalism and the massive technical experimentations which are conventionally attributed to the Modernist era.⁷² Hutcheon additionally argues that postmodern fiction—such as Bertolt Brecht’s drama or Bakhtin’s dialogism—often tends to adopt its political commitment in conjunction with both distancing irony and technical innovations. Starting from the Bakhtinian concepts of “dialogism” and “heteroglossia,” Hutcheon theorises the concept of “dedoxification,” defined as a «site of de-naturalizing critique». Therefore, this process should act as a dismantling of dogma (δόξα meaning ‘rule’ or ‘dogma’ in Greek) transmitted by the literary tradition and dominating system of power, in order to demonstrate the artificiality on which society, including all the elements that structure it, is based. According to Hutcheon, «the postmodern initial concern is to de-naturalise some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ [...] are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us»⁷³ We are able to affirm that Hutcheon’s detoxification process can also be read as a socio-constructivist procedure due to its aim to dismantle dogmas and expose society and its related schemes. Furthermore, this is applicable to the same process enacted by the study and discourse regarding gender.

It is through this interpretation of postmodernist and comparative devices that I will now focus on Hutcheon’s approach to parody and its dialogic role within the literary tradition.

As Hutcheon explains in her *Theory of Parody*⁷⁴, theorists who preceded her have considered the etymological root of the Greek word παρωδία to mean ‘counter-song’ (parà = παρὰ, similar and odè = ὠδή, song), thereby limiting their consideration to the classification of parody as an opposition or

⁷² Hutcheon, Linda, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, New York, pp. 2-3.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Hutcheon, Linda, *A theory of parody: The teachings of twentieth-century art forms*, University of Illinois press, 2000.

contrast between texts. By contrast, Hutcheon focuses on the alternative meaning of the part παρα-, which can also be interpreted as “beside.” Instead of a contrast, this suggests a harmony with the matrix text. For Hutcheon, this second meaning of the prefix παρα- is the initiation of a discussion based on modern art forms, considering «parody, then, in its ironic “trans-contextualization” and inversion, is repetition with difference»⁷⁵.

According to Braidotti, experimentation with tradition is unavoidable when restructuring cultural imagery. From a feminist perspective, this necessity for experimentation is always associated with an emphasis on a more affirmative style, as those constituted by the so-called “figurations”, as defined by Donna Haraway, which are represented as forms that may express alternative possibilities for marginalised perspectives within feminism. The cast out individual becomes, in this sense, a map on which feminist artists and intellectuals identify social cultural codes; for them it is a body which has already been deprived of its essence and meaning, an unsatisfactory imitation. As Braidotti states, «it is scary but also beloved, like an old dress»⁷⁶. Nevertheless, parody as in the repetition of images can, especially for contemporary society and for the neo-liberalist system, permeate the copied image until the point of indecipherability. In the postmodern era, there are two contradictory tendencies; one positively portrays women and ostracised groups, and the other which reproduces stereotyped, negative, tragicomic and symbolic representation for the cultural imagery: «D'altra parte però continua anche, e anzi si intensifica la produzione della femminilità feticcio, oggetto di manipolazioni rimodellamenti e di ristrutturazioni sia a livello immaginario che sociale. Mai in nessun campo la sfida è così evidente come in quello della pratica artistica»⁷⁷. The great number of feminist writers of science-fiction,

⁷⁵ *A theory of parody: The teachings of twentieth-century art forms*. University of Illinois Press, 2000., p.32

⁷⁶ Braidotti, Rosi, *Materialismo radicale: itinerari etici per cyborg e cattive ragazze*. Mimesis, 2019, Kindle edition, p.55

⁷⁷ “On the other hand, however, the production of fetish femininity continues, and indeed intensifies, the object of manipulation, remodeling and restructuring on both the imaginary and

cyberpunk, movie scripts, codified with violence in their expressive styles is testimony to this. Despite bringing harm upon themselves and the marginalised communities they make room for, they are forced to comply with social norms. Braidotti specifies that the practice of parody, also defined by her as the «'as if' philosophy»⁷⁸. As a matter of fact, the “as if” philosophy is the validation of a wantering being no longer based on the idea of feminine human nature. Feminism, for the collective «is not enclosed in one only body [...], it is a vagina exposed out of the body and publicly exposed, which challenges biology and nature, in order to occupy a political space.⁷⁹

Parody and, by extension, its power, implies «transforming the practice of repetitions into a politically affirmative position. [...] In other words, parody can be politically empowering as long as its aim is the subversion of the dominant codes. Thus, it is essential to keep in mind radical forms of corporality, dynamic and nomadic, which may allow the expression of the creative multiplicities».⁸⁰

1.3 The Gothic and Science Fiction: Towards a feminist epistemology

To associate Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson with one literary genre would be an oversimplified and incomplete categorization. The same applies to Mary Shelley's, whose work and influence on literary genres have been a significant example for horror, Gothic literature, and science fiction. During her activity as a writer and journalist, Angela Carter experimented with a number of literary genres while using them as a framework for her investigations and themes. These genres range from Gothic fiction (as shown in *The Bloody Chamber* and *Fireworks*), to picaresque fiction (as in *The*

social levels. Never in any field is the challenge so evident as in that of artistic practice.” [my translation], p.56

⁷⁸ lit. 'filosofia del 'come se'.

⁷⁹ Braidotti, Rosi, *Materialismo radicale: itinerari etici per cyborg e cattive ragazze*. Mimesis, 2019, p.58

⁸⁰ Collettiva XXX 2014, p. 105

Passion of New Eve, *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* and *Nights at the Circus*), Bildungsroman (*Wise Children* and *The Magic Toyshop*), folktale (*The First and Second Book of Virago Fairy Tales*), theatre (*Come Unto These Yellow Sands: Four Radio Plays*) and cinema (she wrote the script for Neil Jordan's 1984 adaptation of *The Bloody Chamber*, *The Company of Wolves*). Similarly, Jeanette Winterson moved from the semi-autobiographical memoir (*Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*) to historical metafiction (*The Passion*, 1987), the postmodern picaresque novel (*Sexing the Cherry*, 1989), post-apocalyptic utopia (*The Stone Gods*, 2007), and transhumanist science-fictional postmodern parody (*Frankissstein: A Love Story*, 2019). The case studies selected from these authors' bibliography are limited to the postmodern picaresque novel, parody, Gothic, and speculative fiction.

I will now investigate how Gothic literature and science fiction constitute the starting point for a reflection on strategies of resistance and transgression—identifiable within the discourses on corporeality and spatiality—when related to a feminist critical and literary approach. Both female Gothic and science fiction constitute a defiance of conventions to realism, politics, gender roles, taboos, and the stability of authority, thereby becoming a fundamental tool for opposition against the masculine nature of literature, society, and culture. As popular culture shows, the representation of women and other secluded groups in relation to the white anthropocentric image has led to stereotyping and replication which reassert a patriarchal society. Both Joanne Hollows and Barbara Creed maintain that especially when dealing with the cinematic mainstream culture, the woman is often declined as a sexualised product for a male spectator, colluding with male desire⁸¹. However, although this representation by Hollows and Creed of the male view/spectator excludes the consideration of an active audience and fails to contextualise the view, it is

⁸¹ (I will talk about this more specifically when analyzing Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, where the quest for the *femme fatale* and cinema icon, Tristessa de Saint Ange, by the misogynist Zero and by the protagonist Eve/lyn, will be a pivotal factor for the narration, as well as pivotal is the performativity of Tristessa's femininity; this will appear more clear once Tristessa will reveal herself a drag figure)

also true that Hollows succeeds in her distinction between a 'woman as images', meaning the study of woman as a product for consumerism and erotic objectification and simulacration, and 'images for women', claiming the need for an interest in legitimising the images of women, as while the first position «is concerned with how the media creates stereotypes and misrepresents the realities of women's lives and social change», images for women are, indeed, the legitimisation of the concept of 'women as images', denouncing how popular culture is argued to be merchandised for masculine desires.⁸² A feminist science fiction has seen, since 1960's, the adherence to this literary genre as a heterogeneous movement, considering the success it obtained among female writers and the sharing of common topics, as in the case of contemporary British and American authors such as Tanith Lee, Joanna Russ, Ursula K. Le Guin, Marion Zimmer Bradley⁸³.

In her 1976 seminal work titled *Female Gothic*, Ellen Moers defines Female Gothic as «the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the 18th century, we have called the Gothic»⁸⁴. Starting in the 1990s, there has been a debate among critics as to whether "Female Gothic" might be considered a literary genre deserving of being studied separately from that of the canonical, male-dominated Gothic literary tradition. Since then, there has been the creation of new classifications, including "women's Gothic", "feminist Gothic", "lesbian Gothic", and "postfeminist Gothic".⁸⁵ While Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall individuate the origins of 'Female Gothic' definition as datable to 1970's critique, when it generated the dichotomic distinction between the so-called 'male Gothic', always expressing Terror of the eternal (M)other, filled with the transgression of taboos, such as incest, and rape, with homicides, supernatural and irrational elements (the epitome of this

⁸² Rooney, Ellen, ed. *The Cambridge companion to feminist literary theory*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 176

⁸³ Lefanu, Sarah, *In the Chinks of the World Machine*. Silverwood Books, 2012.

⁸⁴ Moers, Ellen, *Female gothic*. London, The Women's Press, [1976], 1978, p. 90

⁸⁵ Wallace, Diana & Smith, A. *Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic in The Female Gothic. New Directions*, ed. by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, Palgrave, 2009, p. 1

classification being Matthew G. Lewis' 1796 *The Monk*), and the Female Gothic plot, which had instead in Ann Radcliffe's works its paradigms.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, albeit these distinctions based on narrative expedients and literary letimotifs, it is important to underline that the Female Gothic does not only constitute the milestone for a feminist science-fictional literature, but it also had an empowering and revolutionary charge⁸⁷. Critics have found in Female Gothic the politically subversive charge of a genre which denounces female dissatisfaction with the patriarchal structures of society by offering a codified expression of the fear of being imprisoned and relegated to the female body and the domestic sphere. This distress can be seen in both Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* with regards to the protagonist's counterpart, Bertha Mason Rochester, and in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), which portrays a solitary and nameless woman.

Furthermore, another interesting perspective is Diane Long Hoelever's, who states that the candid victimism of Female Gothic's heroines may constitute a masquerade, or rather a strategy of passive-aggressive masochist resistance to triumph over an oppressive patriarchal society; thus, she classifies this attitude as index of a 'Gothic feminism'⁸⁸. Conversely, apart from sharing with the Female Gothic political intentions of cultural change while adopting its own strategies of subversion, feminist science fiction also facilitates a multifaceted field of theoretical and political investigation. Thus, the female Gothic and contemporary feminist science fiction are interconnected if we consider the inheritance of this last genre taken from the female Gothic and its inner theoretical and narrative patterns, which aim to create a counternarrative of subversion.

As Braidotti explains in *In Metamorfosi*, «science fiction furnishes the ideal culture medium (lit. "terreno di coltura ideale") to explore what Haraway kindly

⁸⁶ Ann Radcliffe was the first to explain the difference between horror and terror in her essay *On the Supernatural in Poetry* in 1826. (Ann Radcliffe (1826) "On the Supernatural in Poetry" in *The New Monthly Magazine* 7, 1826, pp 145–52.)

⁸⁷ Williams, Anne, *Art of Darkness*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

⁸⁸ Hoeveler, Diane Long, *Gothic Feminism*. Penn State University Press, 2021.

describes as “the promises of monsters”». ⁸⁹ This concept of 'promises of monsters' cited by Braidotti comes from Donna Haraway, who elucidated it in her eponymous article, *The Promises of Monsters. A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others*. Haraway used the metaphor of 'diffraction' to explain the effects of difference, endorsing the idea that science fiction is a genre which is imbued with encounters between “problematic selves and unexpected others”, and their reciprocal “interpenetration of boundaries”⁹⁰. What is more, «within the belly of the monster, even in/appropriated others seem to be interpellated [...] into a particular location [a thirdspace] that I have learned to call a cyborg subject position»⁹¹. Thus, the aim for Haraway is to «produce a patterned vision of how to move and what to fear in the topography of an impossible but all-too-real present, in order to find an absent, but perhaps possible, other present»⁹² In other terms, science fiction and the monsters as actively political figurations that are generated by this literary genre should offer new strategies and new ways of representation for our present-day society. Braidotti also shows how Teresa De Lauretis, as well, supports science fiction and its well-defined textual processes «which coexist with narrativization and which contrast its tendency to totalise its meaning»⁹³, suggesting that contemporary science fiction has left the conflict between utopia and dystopia and is moving towards the territory of the Foucauldian heterotopic space, the “cyborg subject position” quoted by Haraway, which represents the coexistence of systems of meaning (the Normative space vs.

⁸⁹ Braidotti, Rosi, *In metamorfosi: verso una teoria materialista del divenire*. Feltrinelli Editore, 2003, p. 218

⁹⁰ Haraway, Donna, "The promises of monsters: a regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others." *Cultural studies*, 1992, pp. 295-337, p. 300

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ De Lauretis, Teresa, *Signs of w(a)nder*, in Teresa De Lauretis, Andrea HUyssen , Karin Woodward (a cura di), *The Technological Imagination: Theories and Fiction*, Coda, Madison, 1983.

the space of Alterity), and which anticipate then the dissolution of a singular notion of the individual.⁹⁴

This consideration on science fiction by De Lauretis anticipates the position of another feminist academic, Sarah Lefanu. In fact, not only Lefanu does defend science fiction as a destabilising genre and a useful tool for feminist practices, but she also exposes, throughout her essay *Feminism and Science Fiction* (1990), and throughout the analysis of some pivotal works by feminist writers, the existence of a revolutionary empathy between women as subaltern subjects, and aliens, that we must consider as paradigms of pure alterity, and thus prototypes of monstrosity, abjection and otherness. The Latin word *alienus* means “other”, “stranger”, “foreigner”, “outsider”, “hostile”, “contrary”, “dangerous”, “inappropriated”. This last definition is also used by Donna Haraway in *The Promises of Monsters*,⁹⁵ when she names the category of Alterity as “inappropriate/d others”⁹⁶. For Lefanu, there is a mutual influence and exchange between women and aliens, since are “l’Altro dello Stesso”, the Other of the Self (Irigaray), and the structural analogy between them being that they both fall into the category of “difference”. This relationship between women and monstrous alterities expressed by Irigaray's notion of 'Other from the Self' appears clear within the analysis of the short story by James Tiptree Jr., *The Women Men don't See*⁹⁷, where the female crew of a spaceship abandons the vehicle to join the alien creatures they met, assumed as initial antagonists of the story. The male character of the story, Fenton, who sticks to the conventions of the hyper-masculinised, virile saviour typical of male-dominated science fiction, shows himself determined to stop the aliens and the women, then takes the gun to shoot at them, but he fails,

⁹⁴ Braidotti, Rosi. *In metamorfosi: verso una teoria materialista del divenire*, Feltrinelli, Milano, p. 219

⁹⁵ Haraway, Donna, "The promises of monsters: a regenerative politics for inappropriate/d others." *Cultural studies*, 1992, pp. 295-337.

⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 299

⁹⁷ Tiptree Jr, James, "The women men don't see." *Warm Worlds and Otherwise*. New York: Ballantine, 1975, pp. 131-64.

wondering «how could a woman choose to live among unknown monsters, [...] to say goodbye to her name, her world?»⁹⁸. Although the story has an open ending, it is fundamental to notice how women have only taken advantage of the aliens' call to leave the patriarchal society they belonged to, epitomised by Fenton, enacting in fact a strategy of resistance for self-liberation, as they are no longer a man's property now, and as they have deliberately chosen to remain unrescued.⁹⁹ Lefanu, finally, comments that Tiptree's story offers an «analysis of our own world, in which women and men, caught up in all the intricate relations of social, political and economic life, become aliens to each other, precisely because those relations are affected by the power that men exercise on women»¹⁰⁰. Lefanu adopts Judith Hanna's aphorism that

«[t]he alien" is *difference* personified. Aliens or monsters] are the Other feared, loathed, longed for [...] aliens serve as a metaphor for women in relation to men and for men in relation to women; they are also a metaphor to the alienated part of the self and, in particular, the divided self forced on women by a male hegemony¹⁰¹.

In my critical discourse, therefore, it will be possible to identify a representative continuity between the othered subjectivities, i.e. the monsters of the Gothic, the science fiction and the horror imagery, and the subjects considered subordinate within the heteronormative patriarchal scenario (female bodies or non-heteronormative identities). Hence, it will be possible to observe the overlapping of the discourse between non-heteronormative identity and monstrous corporeality in the works of Mary Shelley, Angela Carter, and Jeanette Winterson.

Feminist science fiction, however, rather than essentially affirming "the feminine", deconstructs the gender category itself, by breaking down the female-male binary. It is important to have in mind the definition coined by

⁹⁸ Lefanu, Sarah, "Feminism and science fiction." *Utopian Studies* 1.1 (1990)., p. 126

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Marleen Barr in *Lost in Space. Probing feminist science fiction and beyond*¹⁰², when Barr uses the expression of “feminist fabulations”. While establishing a dialogue with Robert Scholes, who defined science fiction as a “structural fabulation”, meaning a sub-category genre which constitutes a sub-category of the didactic speculation characterising the fantastic and adventure novel, Barr’s “feminist fabulation”, instead, includes Scholes speculative modality but it is also, as a female and feminist pattern, the moment of validation of a narrative and restructuring act for myths, values and patriarchal models.¹⁰³

Within the imaginary of women's Gothic literature, as well as in feminist science fiction, this means a process of renegotiation of canonical literary aesthetics. Thus, Gothic and science-fictional monstrosities, together with feminine and anti-normative identities, have always been objectified by the male canonical aesthetics as representations of difference to be opposed to the norm. However, I argue that resignifying them through feminist fabulations, that is, through a feminist science fiction and a female Gothic literature, it means reappropriating both the concept of the literary canon by deconstructing it and the meaning of embodied difference. Difference, then, becomes the embedded testimony of a monstrous, formerly subaltern subject which resists heteropatriarchal logics.

In Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters,¹⁰⁴ Jack Halberstam is able to explore the relationship between Gothic fiction and queer identities, stating that «Gothic fiction is a technology of subjectivity [...] which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known».¹⁰⁵ In the introduction to his essay, Halberstam begins his exploration of monstrosity related to gender studies by starting from the character of the transgender serial killer Buffalo Bill, main

¹⁰² Barr, Marleen S, *Lost in space: Probing feminist science fiction and beyond*. UNC Press Books, 1993.

¹⁰³ Braidotti, Rosi, *In metamorfosi: verso una teoria materialista del divenire*. p. 228

¹⁰⁴ Halberstam, Jack, *Skin Shows. Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Duke University Press, 1995.

¹⁰⁵ Ivi, p.2

antagonist from Jonathan Demme's 1991 movie *The Silence of the Lambs*, based on the novel by Thomas Harris. It is interesting to see how Halberstam interprets Buffalo Bill as a postmodern adaptation of the Shelleyan Frankenstein's Creature. While describing the cringe scene in which Buffalo Bill dances in front of the mirror while wearing a dress made up with the human skin taken from his female victims, Halberstam states that «skin, in this morbid scene, represents monstrosity of surfaces» and while Buffalo Bill dresses up in his suit and plays like a *femme fatale* in front of the mirror, he becomes a layered body, «a body of many surfaces laid one upon the other»¹⁰⁶. Halberstam believes that monstrosity and its reception within literature and other forms of media has changed over time. It first moved from the 19th century monstrosity according to Gothic fiction, to a modern metaphor of individuality and its many layers, all while fluctuating between inside and outside, female and male, body and mind, native and foreign, proletarian and aristocrat. In contrast, for Postmodernism scenario, instead, monsters show the obscenity that Jean Baudrillard called "the obscenity of immediate visibility"¹⁰⁷. In this case, he was referring to the harsh and immovable nature of information and communication, thus providing evidence of how monsters can represent and embody destabilization. As Halberstam emphasises, monstrosity and its representations evolved historically rather than being psychological universalistic assumptions. For instance, the racist and anti-semitic wave in 19th century England may have shaped the terror associated with the monster who invades the domestic space. This can be seen throughout Gothic literature from 1890's and is represented in novels like Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).¹⁰⁸ In these

¹⁰⁶ Ivi, p. 1

¹⁰⁷ Baudrillard, Jean, "The ecstasy of communication." *New York* (1983). in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, Port Townsend, Bay Press, Washington, 1983, 130.

¹⁰⁸ For a further analysis of the correlation between deviance and monstrosity in the Victorian age, see Saverio Tomaiuolo's essay, *Deviance in neo-Victorian culture: Canon, transgression, innovation*. Tomaiuolo is particularly concerned with analysing the recovery of such elements

authors' novels, the terror is consumed in the backstreets of London, the neuralgic center of Victorian Empire and the Western paradigm of progress and civilization, but also a place where the monster

will find you in the intimacy of your own home (or you its home) and alter forever the comfort of domestic privacy. The monster peeps through the window, enters through the back door, and sits beside you in the parlor. [...] The racism that seems to inhere to the nineteenth-century Gothic monster, then, may be drawn from imperialistic or colonialist fantasies of other lands and peoples, but it concentrates its imaginative force upon the other peoples in "our" lands, the monsters at home.¹⁰⁹

Halberstam goes on to claim that, between the late 18th to 19th century, Gothic horror moved from being about fear of corrupted aristocracy, as in Walpole and Radcliffe, to fear of the embodied monstrous corporeality, its epitome found in Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Indeed, it is the culmination of Julia Kristeva's abject figure, a foreign body that maintains some familiar connotations but nevertheless confuses the boundaries between the self and the other. The antisemitic wave of the late 19th century imperfectly embodied in the image of Stoker's vampire, Stevenson's doppelganger, or Wilde's corrupted image of a gorgeous dandy gentleman hiding a horrible secret. Likewise, monsters are «meaning machines» as «they can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one»¹¹⁰. They do not only project our fears, incarnated, but they also embody a crisis for the steadiness of the conventional system and its principles. Monsters, in other words, «have to be everything the human is not and, in producing the negative of human as white, male, middle class, and heterosexual»¹¹¹.

in neo-Victorian media, in recent products such as Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), Clare Clark's *The Great Stink* (2005), the television series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016), or in contemporary art through Banksy, Dan Hillier etc. Tomaiuolo also explores various forms of deviance by referring to episodes from the Victorian era, such as the real case of the "bearded woman" Julia Pastrana. See Tomaiuolo, Saverio. *Deviance in neo-Victorian culture: Canon, transgression, innovation*. Palgrave, 2018.

¹⁰⁹ Halberstam, Jack, *Skin Shows. Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, p. 15

¹¹⁰ Ivi, p. 21

¹¹¹ Ibid.

As we will see emerge from the case study of this thesis, a different conversation must be had with regards to the female version of monstrosity, which is treated as an unexpressed potentiality of Self and voice by Victor Frankenstein. As a matter of fact, Frankenstein destroys the mate he had previously created for the Creature without ever giving her life in the first place. He does so out of fear of the potentially deadly consequences that their union could have for human beings and recognises once again the devastating power of his *hybris*. Nonetheless, according to Siobhan Craig the female monster in *Frankenstein*, together with her symbolic (and physical) annihilation by Victor Frankenstein, represents an unrealised potential monstrosity on account of his fear that her existence and union with the male mate would subvert «the hierarchized model of self-constitution that is based on alterity and inequality»¹¹². Siobhan's deduction is motivated by Anne Herrmann's essay *The Dialogic and Difference*, wherein Herrmann redefines Bakhtinian dialogism notion from a feminist perspective. Herrmann states that the "female dialogic" is a process of self-development that begins with a dialogue and leaves behind the hierarchical male model of structuring the self/subject as an entity that is in opposition to an objectified "other", because while in «the self/other (male/female) and subject/object (male/female) oppositions, hierarchy is an intrinsic part of any construction of self/Subject, [...] while in a "specular" model, in which the subject is defined as female, this hierarchy is deconstructed»¹¹³. Meanwhile a novel such as *Frankenstein* demonstrates the possibility of a non-hierarchical dialogic but nullifies it in the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and the Creature. Furthermore, Frankenstein also re-establishes the condition of Otherness of the monster by not providing him with a female companion of the same nature as himself. The female monster is hence a «pile of 'remains', the leftover material, the excess of narrative Gothic» and as such, she «is present on the margins but she does

¹¹² Hohne, Karen Ann, and Helen Wussow, eds. *A dialogue of voices: Feminist literary theory and Bakhtin*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 93

¹¹³ Ivi, p.89

not signify in her body the power of horror, she signifies its limits, its boundaries»¹¹⁴.

Hence, in this PhD thesis, where one of the objectives is to rehabilitate the alternative corporealities and aesthetics at the service of a feminist aesthetics and its evolution from 19th century English literature to contemporary age, I believe it is important to introduce the notion of the sublime and the category of grotesque, which will constitute tropes and tools to plan a methodology of resistance and liberation from patriarchal heterosexist literary schemes in which the representation of monstrosity has been encaged, defying the established symbolic order. The monster, then, will be a means to re-discuss the category of beautiful and re-negotiate its position within the category of grotesque, as well as a means to revisit its exclusion from the sublime as figuration of alterity.

Just as the grotesque, as we will see, the sublime, or rather, the “feminine” sublime (Yeager), must face a cultural and canonical authority that limits and defines it. The feminine sublime, according to Barbara Claire Freeman, is not a rhetorical means nor an aesthetic category, but it is rather presented as a complex of experiences that resist categorization or classification. Here, «the subject enters into a relation with an otherness -social, aesthetic, political, ethic, erotic, that is excessive and unrepresentable». ¹¹⁵

In order to evidence a crisis within the language and the modalities of representation of the Self in Romanticism, the sublime represents the elevation of the Subject over an object or experience that threatens it; in other words, it constitutes a strategy of appropriation enacted by the subject in order to classify what the Subject perceives as a threat, to objectify that very threat¹¹⁶. For Immanuel Kant, the sublime embodies the elevation of reason over an order of experiences which cannot be represented. Conversely,

¹¹⁴ Halberstam, Jack, *Skin Shows. Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, p. 56

¹¹⁵ Freeman, Barbara Claire, *The Feminine Sublime*. University of California Press, 1995, p. 2

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Edmund Burke recognised the sublime as a quality of greatness beyond all possibility of calculation, measurement, or imitation. Traditionally, the sublime implies a restricted phase followed by one of elevated lucidity by means of which the reason of the subject resists the source of blockage, denouncing its inability to show the true essence of the object of sublime. Therefore, the subject obtains supremacy over a superior being that resists its powers of measurement and categorization. In other terms, as François Lyotard explains in his reworking of the permanence of the Kantian sublime in postmodernism, the sublime is not a mere object, but rather it represents the response/reaction of the Subject to everything the Subject may not be able to reach, as «there are no sublime objects, only sublime feelings»¹¹⁷. Consequently, the recognised theories of the sublime usually judge, evaluate, tame and finally exclude an Otherness, which is presented as mainly engendered as female Otherness. In Burke's *Enquiry*, for instance, we may observe how both the categories of race and gender can furnish a powerful metaphor through which the construction of the (female) sublime is shown. By associating and overlapping the notion of darkness and blackness, Burke tells the parable of the born-blind boy who, after being operated from a cataract, is «struck by great horror at the sight» of a Negro woman¹¹⁸.

For Freeman, the fact that the main theorists of the sublime, such as Burke, Longinus and Kant, represent the sublime as being founded mainly on metaphors of sexual difference has to do with a pre-existing conception of the “feminine” as fearful and thereby monstrous. This brings Freeman to observe the sublime as an allegory for the construction of patriarchal subjectivity which «maintains its borders by subordinating difference and by appropriating rather than identifying with that which presents itself as other».¹¹⁹ Furthermore,

¹¹⁷ Courtine, Jean-François, *Of the Sublime: Presence in Question: Essays by Jean-Francois Courtine, Michel Deguy, Eliane Escoubas, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Louis Marin, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Jacob Rogozinski*. SUNY Press, 1993.

¹¹⁸ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 131

¹¹⁹ Freeman, Barbara Claire, *The Feminine Sublime*. University of California Press, 1995, p.5

Freeman maintains that the discourse on the sublime has, from a feminist perspective, always worked as a strategy of neutralization of excesses, rather than being an explication of them. It should be specified that, by indicating the existence of a female sublime, Freeman does not want to raise it over the “male sublime”, or refer to any particular representation (these considerations must be adopted as complementary statements both for the category of female sublime and female grotesque); but rather to recognise that, from the novels written by women, including 18th century female authors (e.g. Mary Shelley) until 20th century culture, it emerges the unicity of their condition of subaltern others, and this condition inevitably influences the articulation of sublimity.¹²⁰ It is not by chance that Freeman reflects on the continuity between the development of the theories of the sublime by Kant in Germany and Burke in England and the simultaneous rise of the novel during the 18th century, which coincides with the shaping of the so-called “modern subject” which will assert “the primacy of the individual”. At the same time, both the theory of the sublime and the novel provide an account of the nature and the development of the Self. As previously anticipated, science fiction and Gothic fiction are two genres that have given the struggle for diversity against «techno-scientific authoritarianism» the opportunity to flourish.

In this regard, Patricia Yeager’s re-conceptualization of the female sublime opposes to a phallogocentric representation of the female self, the Oedipal model of sublime focused on the «poetic/scientific powers on the productive expression and the “dominion” (Kant’s term) of transcendent reason, which requires the repression of the pre-Oedipal desire for the mother’s body»¹²¹. As Yeager explains, there is a recurring pattern in female literary works dealing with the sublime since 18th to 20th century literature according to which women refuse the category of beautiful and privilege the sublime and the

¹²⁰ (see A. Kolodny, *Some notes on defining a Feminist Literary Criticism*, University of Chicago Press, 1975, Vol.2, No. 1, pp. 75-92)

¹²¹ Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan, *The seven beauties of science fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2012., p. 176

grotesque, bespeaking «the noumenal power of the once-inferiorized identities»¹²², further emphasising the power of creation, since

in the “pre-Oedipal” sublime these libidinal elements [of desire for the pre-Oedipal bonding with a mother’s body] are not repressed; they break into consciousness and are welcomed as a primary, healthful part of the writer’s experience, as part of the motive for metaphor.¹²³

Although this vision of a maternal sublime can be seen as essentialist and rooted in Cixous’ critique of Freud, Yeager has the merit of enhancing a new declination of science-fictional writing which is based on female parameters and which requires neither a superelevation, as explicated by Freeman, nor a repression of otherness. This means that what has been considered as the difference by the male literary canon, the female monster, becomes now a pattern of reappropriation of a female body by means of a female narrative voice. By quoting Theodor Adorno, who invites to consider the Other not as opposition but rather as an opportunity for confrontation and enrichment, Yeager reports that «the reconciled condition would not be the philosophical imperialism of annexing the alien. Instead, its shapeliness would lie in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one’s own»¹²⁴.

Otherness, therefore, is either related to the fear of something which the Subject identifies as difference to be contrasted, otherwise it refers to an incarnated experience, that makes Otherness and Subject overlap, creating a monstrous effect.

In this regard, Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, who has widely worked on science fiction and its relationship with the grotesque, in his essay *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* believes that there are, among the seven major patterns of

¹²² Yeager, Patricia, “Toward a Female Sublime” in *Gender and Theory: Dialogues on Feminist Criticism*, ed. Linda Kaufman, Blackwell, New York, 1989, 191–212., p. 205

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ivi, p. 208

science fiction, two particular ones, which identifies as the science-fictional sublime and the science-fictional grotesque. Csicsery-Ronay gives his own definition of both the sublime and grotesque, stating that while

[t]he sublime has to do with the mind reflecting on its power, or lack of it, to understand the totality of the world, which of course includes the mind itself. The grotesque has to do with the struggle to accommodate mutable, unstable objects and beings in the world. These objects may include the mind's own mentifacts, its thoughts externalized with respect to their thinker.¹²⁵

The grotesque, on the other hand, occurs when a disorientation within the routine of human lives and institutions occurs, trapping «the sublime in the body», partly to subvert it, partly to bring the sublime to earth by making it corporeal.

This image of the female sublime as simulacrum and intangible embodied self is clearly explained in Slavoj Žižek's essay on Tarkovsky's cinema, with a specific reference to his 1972 movie *Solaris*, which is also a 1961 novel by the Polish science fiction author Stanislaw Lem. Here, Tarkovsky's movie is used as example which is functional to explain the triggering ambiguity of a grotesque-embodied identity. As Žižek explains, «Solaris is a planet with an oceanic fluid surface which moves incessantly and, from time to time, imitates recognizable forms — not only elaborate geometric structures, but also gigantic childbodies or human buildings; although all attempts to communicate with the planet fail, scientists entertain the hypothesis that Solaris is a gigantic brain which somehow reads our minds»¹²⁶

The male protagonist of *Solaris*, Kelvin, is an astronaut who leaves the Earth for a mission on Solaris and to recover after the grief of his wife's suicide. However, the efforts of Kelvin to get rid of his wife, Harey, reveal useless, as she keeps on re-materialising inside of his cabin, and he discovers, after analyzing her, that her tissue is not composed of atoms like

¹²⁵ Csicsery-Ronay, Istvan, *The seven beauties of science fiction*. Wesleyan University Press, 2012., p. 182

¹²⁶ Žižek, Slavoj, Angelaki: *Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, "The thing from inner space on Tarkovsky", 1999, p.222

human beings' tissue, and that beneath a certain microlevel there is nothing but void. As Žižek shows, Harey is nothing but a «materialization of his [Kelvin's] innermost traumatic fantasies»¹²⁷, and this would explain also the gaps in her memory, due to the fact that she is not the real Harey, but rather a materialization of the phantasmatic image that Kelvin has re-created basing on Harey's memory, which has been used by the intelligent thirdspace, the planet Solaris, to create Harey's simulacrum. There is, however, an interesting gap, though, as Harey, despite not being any substantial identity of her own, perceives, understands and acquires the status of the Real embodied subject that requires to be: «like fire in Lynch's films, she forever walks with the hero, sticks to him, never lets him go. Harey, this fragile spectre, pure semblance, cannot ever be erased – she is “undead”, eternally recurring»¹²⁸. Žižek, at this point, questions whether the female grotesque in *Solaris* may correspond to the classic paradigm of the antifeminist Weiningerian notion of the woman represented as a projection of man's mind, the materialization of his guilt, who can only bring to a cyclical suicide for both man and woman, like a fall into sin. In other words, Harey materialises the male fantasy of the embodied Otherness, a projection of nightmares and fears which is typical of the male science-fictional narrative.

Similarly, Tristessa of Saint Ange from Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* is a passive object of male desire and a parody of the *femme fatale* represented in old-age cinema, as shown when Evelyn dedicates her his sexual fantasies in the intro of the novel («The last night I spent in London, I took some girl or other to the movies and, through her mediation, I paid you a little tribute of spermatozoa, Tristessa»¹²⁹ . Simultaneously, we can imagine the unfinished female monster from Shelley's *Frankenstein* not only as the projection of the concerns for a monstrous progeny by Victor Frankenstein, but also as the erotic projection of the male Creature's fantasies. Harey, then,

¹²⁷ Ivi, p. 222

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Carter, Angela, *The Passion of New Eve*, Virago Press, 2015. p. 1

will take consciousness of being Kelvin's nightmarish projection and will attempt to kill herself without results, committing what Žižek defines "the death of the Subject": she tries, in fact, to kill herself as pure being, since she is nothing more than the projection of the previous, earthly, Harey. She enacts a choice which is opposed to Solaris' intentions, wanting to free herself and Kelvin from her condition of being the projected monstrosity of a dead woman, while performing a suicidal resistance against the unfathomable otherness represented by the visions that Solaris generates on the water surface. This example from *Solaris* is interesting, thus, as it links to Judith Butler's perspective on the dichotomic relationship of the Hegelian relationship between the Master and the Servant, that can be applied to the general relationship between the Self/Subject and the Other/Monster, as the relationship between two hierarchised distinguished identities. This social contract, Butler explains, is based on the following principle: "you, bondsman (servant) be my body for me, but do not let me know that the body that you are is my body".¹³⁰ As Žižek explains,

The disavowal on the part of the lord is thus double: first, the lord disavows his own body, he postures as a disembodied desire and compels the bondsman to act as his body; secondly, the bondsman has to disavow that he acts merely as the lord's body and act as an autonomous agent, as if the bondsman's bodily labouring for the lord is not imposed on him but is his autonomous activity... This structure of double (and thereby self-effacing) disavowal also renders the patriarchal matrix of the relationship between man and woman: in a first move, woman is posited as a mere projection/reflection of man, his insubstantial shadow, hysterically imitating but never able really to acquire the moral stature of a fully constituted self-identical subjectivity; however, this status of a mere reflection itself has to be disavowed and the woman provided with a false autonomy, as if she acts the way she does within the logic of patriarchy on account of her own autonomous logic (women are "by nature" submissive, [I reject this statement by Žižek] compassionate, self-sacrificing...).¹³¹

The discourse by Žižek goes on with a statement that would seem to be the landing point of the feminist perspective with which Anne Herrmann interprets the carnivalesque dialogism of Bakhtin; namely that Harey from *Solaris* kills

¹³⁰ Žižek, Slavoj, Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities, *The thing from inner space on Tarkovsky*, 1999, p.222

¹³¹ Ivi, p. 223

herself twice: the first time as a terrestrial human being, the second time as simulacrum while enacting a heroic act of auto-erasure. On this second occasion, Harey rejects her condition of fetish, of chimera, of freak, of monster, and despite this she elevates herself to be a Subject in the most radical sense of this definition. It is here that we can understand the meaning of a feminist Alterity.

1.4 Monstrosity, grotesqueness, abjection and body politics

In the same manner as the Gothic, the grotesque refers to a diverse system of influences and definitions that must be filtered by situating this work in women's writing and the feminist literary approach. It is nevertheless necessary to specify that the etymological origin of the term 'grotesque' can be traced back to 15th century Italy. In his autobiography, Benvenuto Cellini refers to the 'grottoes' of the Esquilino Hill in Rome, where the rests of Emperor Nero's Domus Aurea (Golden Palace, lit.) were discovered in 1480. What emerged from the excavation was a controversial and unclassifiable style of art in frescoes with anthropomorphic figures and mythological beasts, which Geoffrey Harpham identifies as recurring images that coincide with another technique that dates back to 100 B.C. «This style», Harpham explains, «consisted of graceful fantasies, symmetrical anatomical impossibilities, small beasts, human heads, and delicate, indeterminate vegetables, all presented as ornament with a faintly mythological character imparted by representations of fauns, nymphs, satyrs, and centaurs»¹³². In the same manner as the Gothic, the grotesque refers to a diverse system of influences and definitions that must be filtered by situating this work in women's writing and the feminist literary approach. It is nevertheless necessary to specify that the etymological origin of the term 'grotesque' can be traced back to 15th century Italy. In his autobiography, Benvenuto Cellini refers to the 'grottoes' of the Esquilino Hill in Rome, where the rests of

¹³² Harpham, Geoffrey Galt, "On the Grotesque, strategies of contradiction in art and literature." *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43.4, 1985, p. 26

Emperor Nero's Domus Aurea (Golden Palace, lit.) were discovered in 1480. What emerged from the excavation was a controversial and unclassifiable style of art in frescoes with anthropomorphic figures and mythological beasts, which Geoffrey Harpham identifies as recurring images that coincide with another technique that dates back to 100 B.C. One can therefore notice how «monsters, rather than definite representations» have since antiquity been juxtaposed to the idea of "grotesqueness"¹³³, to the point that 'monstrosity' and 'grotesqueness' have been used as interchangeable terms. However, before entering into that aesthetic and literary critical field, it is important to mention the authors who have made a fundamental contribution to the study of grotesqueness, monstrosity, and abjection: Mikhail Bakhtin¹³⁴ (first published in Russia in 1965), Wolfgang Kayser¹³⁵ (first published in 1933), Mary Russo¹³⁶ (first published in 1995, and preceded by an essay, *Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory*¹³⁷, from 1986), and Julia Kristeva¹³⁸ (*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, first published in France in 1980).

Mikhail Bakhtin's essay *Rabelais and His World* is still now considered as an important source for the study of the grotesque. Starting from an analysis of François Rabelais' pentalogy of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* and the related background Renaissance societal context, the Bakhtinian work deepens the questions of some notions that the Russian author had already anticipated in some of his previous essays, as the 'carnavalesque' and the 'grotesque body', or to a more extent, the grotesque realism. Bakhtin, in fact, while anticipating the notion of carnivalesque utopia, which we have already seen in section 1.2,

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaïlovich, and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*. Vol. 341. Indiana University Press, 1984.

¹³⁵ Kayser, Wolfgang, and Ulrich Weisstein, *The grotesque in art and literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1981.

¹³⁶ Russo, Mary, *The female grotesque: risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge, 2012.

¹³⁷ Russo, Mary, "Female grotesques: Carnival and theory." *Feminist studies/critical studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1986, pp. 213-229.

¹³⁸ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of horror*, Vol. 98. University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 1982.

evidences the complex nature of the carnivalesque laughter, which was first of all a laughter of party and entertainment. The laughter belongs to all social classes, as everybody laughs, it is a universal pattern, which makes the entire world appear as comic, and it is finally an ambivalent expedient: while it is joyful and full of glee, in fact, the carnivalesque laughter is also sarcastic, and it both denies and affirms, it both buries the dead in their grave and resurrects them.¹³⁹

It is interesting, in this regard, to consider Lisa Gasbarrone's confrontation between Hélène Cixous' *Laughter of the Medusa* and Michail Bakhtin's carnivalesque dialogism, for while in the former's *écriture féminine* there remains a monologic process of search for the unconscious within the individual, rather than the living mix of varied and opposing voices revendicated by dialogism, Bakhtin's laughter is founded on the principle that «official discourses can and should be subverted» as «the “culturally deaf semipatriarchal” world, like Cixous' male ear, must, even for its own sake, be made to hear»¹⁴⁰, although I believe that Cixous' *Medusa* manifesto must not be considered as an invitation to isolation of woman as an essentialist image seeking for the true inner self, but rather as a process of construction of a female authorial voice, or *écriture*, which had no full chance to fully express itself within a phallogocentric canon.

Bakhtin, hence, recognises the fact that laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object¹⁴¹ and embarks the discussion regarding “grotesque realism”. While using images that refer to popular culture found in Rabelais and the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*, Michail Bakhtin states that the conception of the body itself derives from comical folklore and that the idea of anatomy

¹³⁹ Bakhtin, Michail, *L'opera di Rabelais e la cultura popolare*, translated in Italian by M. Romano, Einaudi, Torino, 1979, 350.

¹⁴⁰ Lisa Gasbarrone, "The Locus for the Other": Cixous, Bakhtin, and Women's Writing in Hohne, Karen Ann, and Helen Wussow, eds. *A dialogue of voices: Feminist literary theory and Bakhtin*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994., p. 16

¹⁴¹ Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study in the Novel*, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 23

with its embodied limits stands at the base of grotesque images. There is an example that Bakhtin uses to validate his discussion of the grotesque body and which I believe anticipates the “in-becoming” corporeal condition that will later be reconsidered by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari with their theorization of the *becoming animal*, and which can be partially interpreted as an anticipation of the post-trans-human process of being. As Bakhtin states, in fact,

The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world (let us recall the grotesque image in the episode of Gargantua's birth on the feast of cattle-slaughtering). This is why the essential role belongs to those parts of the grotesque body in which it outgrows its own self, transgressing its own body, in which it conceives a new, second body: the bowels and the phallus. These two areas play the leading role in the grotesque image, and it is precisely for this reason that they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization; they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary (The nose can also in a way detach itself from the body).¹⁴²

The grotesque body for Bakhtin, thus, is itself a metamorphic process of material transformation and their transformation is also influenced by the binary difference between the male and female sexual organs. As Bakhtin explains, then, great importance is given also to the hyperbolization of the womb and the phallus as autonomous hungry entities, and most importantly the role of the mouth, which swallows the world. For Bakhtin, the body is the epitome of a cyclical process of life and death, as two phases which are continuatively indissoluble the one from the other:

the main events in the life of the grotesque body, the acts of the bodily drama, take place in this sphere. Eating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body -all these acts are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven.¹⁴³

¹⁴² Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaïlovich, and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*. Vol. 341, Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 317

¹⁴³ Ibid.

According to Bakhtin, the grotesque body is a place of passage where life and death, birth, and decay, form a cyclical, never-ending loop. Bakhtin refutes the idea of a body that is limited to itself, indubitable and still, as this would contrast with the image of a binary body where external and internal dimensions are simultaneously shown as a single image. Furthermore, the grotesque body is defined as cosmic and universal because it reflects the four elements, celestial bodies, the zodiac, and can be fused with natural phenomena and landscapes, filling the whole universe.

This image of the body, thus, is investigated by Michail Bakhtin within the European popular culture, moving from Ancient age until the contemporary age, but what he also states and clarifies is that this canon of grotesqueness, which is widely considered as a common element all around the world in many cultures and literary traditions, has never been corresponding to the classical canon of the perfect, uncorrupted body. It has, rather, conquered its space inside the European official tradition only starting from the 16th century, namely, in François Rabelais times. As Bakhtin clarifies,

The new bodily canon, in all its historic variations and different genres, presents an entirely finished, completed, strictly limited body, which is shown from the outside as something individual. That which protrudes, bulges, sprouts, or branches off (when a body transgresses its limits and a new one begins) is eliminated, hidden, or moderated. All orifices of the body are closed. The basis of the image is the individual, strictly limited mass, the impenetrable facade, the opaque surface and the body's "valleys" acquire an essential meaning as the border of a closed individuality that does not merge with other bodies and with the world. All attributes of the unfinished world' are carefully removed, as well as all the signs of its inner life. The verbal norms of official and literary language, determined by the canon, prohibit all that is linked with fecundation, pregnancy, childbirth. There is a sharp line of division between familiar speech and "correct" language. ¹⁴⁴

The new bodily canon gives predominance to the head, the face, the eyes, the lips, all elements that have a characterial and expressive relevance. The new bodily canon is unique, different from the grotesque body which is an in-becoming process. This body, instead, has no trace of dualism and all the

¹⁴⁴ Ivi, p. 320

events that concern it become irreversible, as death, which will never coincide with life as a cyclical scheme of resurrection through evolution of corporeal matter like in the case of the grotesque experience.

This will be, of course, a central element of divergence in Shelley's *Frankenstein* between the subject, Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature, a grotesque resurrected and patchworked being made of other corpses' bodily parts. Old age is separated from youth in the new bodily canon, and it is not seen as a natural development of a cycle of deterioration of the body through years. The individual life is a priority, as its beginning and ending are individual and irreversible. On the contrary, in the grotesque body

death brings nothing to an end, for it does not concern the ancestral body, which is renewed in the next generation. The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection. One body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image.¹⁴⁵

Similarly, in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, the bi-corporeal dimension is duplicated within the bodies of Eve/lyn, due to their coercive sexual reassignment and their later gender dysphoria, and within Tristessa de Saint Ange's disguised identity, that I would not reduce to a Butlerian drag queen figure, but rather consider as a gender fluid or, more precisely, a transgender woman. Another element of research which is of interest for this work, and which is also fundamental in order to understand the evolution of the body horror as a genre and Gothic fiction as a literary field for its growth, is the discourse on the evolution of the grotesque during the Romantic Age; this will be helpful in order to further understand the philosophical, historical and aesthetic background in which, during 19th century Europe, Mary Shelley and her contemporaries conceived their literary production. Differently, in fact, from the 16th century's interpretation of the grotesque and laughter as strategic tools, during the Romantic Age we can observe how there is a newly

¹⁴⁵ Ivi, p.322

discovered interest for the grotesque as a category, but with a brand new meaning and methodology of approach from the past.

The new grotesque is a subjective and individual interpretation of the world which differs from the context of dialogism and carnivalesque described by Bakhtin and attributed to the Renaissance period; rather, it is a genre which is not considered as a popular instrument of class subversion, as the Medieval and Renaissance usage of it, but a genre 'da camera', «like a Carnival lived in solitude, with the awake consciousness of one's own isolation»¹⁴⁶. In English literature, the prototype for the Romantic grotesque used by Bakhtin in his investigation will be Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, where Sterne attempts to apply the Renaissance vision of the world expressed by Miguel de Cervantes and Rabelais to his contemporary age¹⁴⁷. According to Bakhtin, this transformation of the collective grotesque becoming individual from the Renaissance to the Romantic Age represents a reactive phenomenon against the Enlightenment and Classicist movements which dominated during the 18th century culture, and which delimited the philosophical thought to the currents of rationalism and didacticism, and to the tendency toward every image that was considered as univocal and accomplished. The laughter, previously seen as a regenerative force, will be widely re-dimensioned in the Romantic grotesque from its Renaissance declination. The most relevant differences between Medieval and Romantic grotesque are shown in relation to what generates fear:

All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognized by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure. Such are the tendencies of Romantic grotesque in its extreme expression. If a reconciliation with the world occurs, it takes place in a subjective, lyric, or even mystic sphere. On the other hand, the medieval and Renaissance folk culture was familiar with the element of terror only as represented by comic monsters, who were defeated by laughter. Terror was turned into something gay and comic. Folk culture brought the world close to man, gave it a bodily form, and established a link through the body and bodily life, in contrast to the abstract and spiritual mastery sought by Romanticism. Images of bodily life, such as eating, drinking, copulation, defecation,

¹⁴⁶ Ivi, p. 37

¹⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 36

almost entirely lost their regenerating power and were turned into "vulgarity." The images of Romantic grotesque usually express fear of the world and seek to inspire their reader with this fear. On the contrary, the images of folk culture are absolutely fearless and communicate this fearlessness to all. This is also true of Renaissance literature. The high point of this spirit is reached in Rabelais' novel; here fear is destroyed at its very origin and everything is turned into gaiety. It is the most fearless book in world literature. Other specific traits are linked with the disappearance of laughter's regenerating power in Romantic grotesque.¹⁴⁸

While in the Renaissance, therefore, the grotesque body is a means to get the human and the world closer, by relating the body with the bodily life, in the Romantic grotesque the declinations of material and corporeal life, such as eating, drinking, ejecting physiologic dejections, mating, giving birth, etc., almost lose their regenerative power while transmitting themselves into inferior life. For Bakhtin, the images of the Romantic grotesque constitute the expression of the fear that inspires and shapes the world, and communicate that fear to the reader, which is quite the opposite of the Rabelaisian grotesque, where fear is pulled away by joy.

Another main characteristic of this new declination of the grotesque is the nocturnal atmosphere, opposite to the gay, lightful, popular antecedent. No wonder that this dark modulation of the category of the grotesque was definitely shaped and theorised in Germany by the Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schlegel in his *Gesprach Uber die Poesie* (1800), where he defined the grotesque as the «most ancient form of human fantasy» and «the natural form of poetry», suggesting the interrelationship between a mysterious, primeval darkness and a quasi-divine monstrous vision of reality and human life.¹⁴⁹ Another Romantic German author, Jean Paul, in his *Vorschule der Aesthetik* (1804), further evidences the major elements of the Romantic grotesque. For Jean Paul, in fact, «grotesqueness is constituted by a clashing contrast between form and content, the unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements, the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying»¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ivi, p. 41

¹⁵⁰ Kayser, Wolfgang, and Ulrich Weisstein, *The grotesque in art and literature*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1981, p. 53

It is possible to identify a continuity in Germany and England between Romanticism's theories of the romantic grotesque and its use in literature, especially if one pays attention to the relationship between body, environment, and disturbing supernatural elements. Maximilian E. Novak, in fact, coined the definition of grotesque applied to Gothic literature in Britain, defining it as «the combination of conventionalised organizational structures, ideas and characters in fiction dealing with the supernatural and bizarre from the time of Horace Walpole to the present day»¹⁵¹

It is clear, hence, how the Gothic grotesque has embraced during the Romantic Age the elements of esoterism, darkness and macabre, as G.R. Thompson confirms in his essay on *The Gothic Imagination*, where he states that “Dark Romanticism” is a more appropriate term to adopt than “Gothic”, but claiming as well that «the rendering of skeletons, demons, witches and ghosts, from ancient times to the present, qualifies automatically as grotesque»¹⁵²

However, as Patricia Yeager gave her contribution in the theorization of the feminine sublime in the Western cultural and literary imaginary, equally Mary Russo is considered as a representative standpoint in the re-definition of the figuration of the female grotesque, due to her research in this field which conveyed in her early article *Female Grotesque: Carnival and Theory* and published in Teresa de Lauretis' *Feminist studies/Critical studies*¹⁵³ and *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity*.¹⁵⁴

Coining the term “aerial” while associated to the sublime as a zone that is at the same time a historical and imaginary space (I will expand this concept in the next paragraphs), for Russo the grotesque emerges finally as a deviation from the Norm. Normalization, in fact, which Teresa de Lauretis

¹⁵¹ Novak, Maximilian E., "Gothic fiction and the grotesque." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 13. No. 1. Duke University Press, 1979, p. 51

¹⁵² Ivi, p. 1

¹⁵³ De Lauretis, Teresa, "Feminist studies/critical studies: Issues, terms, and contexts." *Feminist studies/critical studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1986. 1-19.

¹⁵⁴ Russo, Mary, *The female grotesque: risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge, 1994.

considers as a reinforced concept of “technologies of gender”, aims to fund a gender difference based on a collective and essentialist distinction of the dichotomy male/female.

In *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo depicts a complex and richly exemplified scenario of those female performances and performers that suggested to her that «the very structure for rethinking the grand abstraction of “liberation” for women depends upon the flexibility and force of juxtaposition». ¹⁵⁵ Her aim is to reconfigure similarities and coincidences within these multiple ‘monstrous’ female representations, circumscribing heterogeneous forms of liberation of the body throughout different contexts and fantasies from the Western display, in order to further structure a body politics that is not the «basis of a universalism, but an uncanny connection characteristic of discourses of the grotesque». ¹⁵⁶ Russo, then, is not attempting to create a system of classification for the female grotesque as an absolute ensemble in culture, society, history or literature, but is rather looking for a common thread that would connect each single embodied grotesque experience. The recurring pattern, as shown, is a stereotyped *cliché* iconography of the monster as well as of the grotesque, especially when dealing with the representation of female figures.

Nevertheless, before proceeding to look closer at Russo’s vision of the grotesque accordingly to a theoretical canon, she clarifies that the “female grotesque”, considerable as an umbrella classification, avoids to become a tautologic notion when the reader takes into account that

the term “female grotesque” does not guarantee the presence of women or exclude male bodies or male subjectivities. The category of the female grotesque is crucial to identity-formation for both men and women as a space of risk and abjection. What might be called “male grotesques” are [...] identities produced through an association with the feminine as the body marked by difference» while «male homosexuality and marked ethnicity interact with the iconography and aesthetics of the grotesque». ¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Russo, Mary, *The female grotesque: risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge, 1994, pp.13-14

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

The image of the female body, then, is generated in Russo's analysis as a logic of action, a "tactic" (or strategy), since, as Russo herself claims, «strategies depend upon a proper place, a place of one's own, from which a certain "calculus of force" can be organized and projected outward»¹⁵⁸. This redefinition of systems of representation, thus, will constitute for Russo a counter-testimony on the ways of depicting monstrosity, which will be necessary in order to re-qualify the value and the meaning that the technology of normative power assigns to the conventional category of Otherness. Plus, this aim will also justify and explain the reason why Russo defines the grotesque body as a 'social body', and her postmodern view toward the body politics. Russo states in fact that postmodernism, together with poststructuralist and transfeminist methodologies, might concretely offer the opportunity for a reconfiguration of cultural identities, and thus guarantee a way-out of essentialist models of «woman-as-body or woman-as-space».¹⁵⁹

In the chapter on Arealism and critical practices, Russo links the aviation pioneer Amelia Earhart's boyishness with "aeriality" to suggest the bizarre idea of flight associated to women, as an activity which is symbolic of virility and danger, stating as well that flight is represented in a female-associated cultural imagery as the «fantasy of a femininity which defies the limits of the body, especially the female body».¹⁶⁰ There is, furthermore, a historical and cultural correlation between the role of the female stunt and a condition of exceptionality from a normal activity of practicing flight. The word 'stunt', in fact, brings the double connotation of extraordinary, both as 1) female model of exceptionalism related to tight rope walking and related to female flight; and

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ivi, p.27

¹⁶⁰ Ivi, p. 44; [I will return to this aspect during my analysis of aeriality in Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*]

2) as the «doubled, dwarfed, distorted, (stunted) creature of the sideshow which stand in as the representatives of a well-known cultural presentation of the female body as monstrous and lacking». ¹⁶¹

These dichotomic representations of a female monster and an aerial grotesque monstrosity are indeed monstrous, even in the first case when the acrobat is related to the double category of *femme fatale* and *freak* who belongs to the circus. These differences, in fact, are necessary for Russo to calibrate the «anatomical differences and body types which characterise the disciplines of bodily production in consumer society», ¹⁶² a theme explored in Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus* but also in Winterson's *The Stone Gods* and *Frankissstein*. ¹⁶³

However, Russo's focus on aeriality is necessary to introduce the turbulent image of the Bakhtinian grotesque, which according to her would limit to reproduce an image of the body as an in-becoming process, yet the analysis of Bakhtin on the concept of a 'general grotesque' gives an image of stillness, crystallization and universality of the female representation. Russo argues, additionally, that the Bakhtinian grotesque body would represent the figure of the socialist state to come, which would explain also the in-becoming condition of Bakhtinian grotesqueness, and which enhances the idea of a subject that transgresses its own limits, both the bodily and the social ones. However, for Russo, the Bakhtinian image of the grotesque female body as a "pregnant and senile hag" only contributes to charge with fear and loathing the ideas around the biological mechanisms of reproduction and aging, effectively conceiving an image of female grotesqueness that is englobed in a male discourse on corporeality: «Bakhtin, like many other social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and

¹⁶¹ Ivi, p.44

¹⁶² Ivi, p.23

¹⁶³ Ibid.

thus his notion of the *Female Grotesque* remains in all directions repressed and undeveloped». ¹⁶⁴

Among the grotesque theorizations, then, the female body is etymologically a 'grotto', since it is associated to the womb as a cavity but also to a place of unknown darkness, and for that it is reduced to the image of the "female, pregnant hag" as the most profound expression of the female grotesqueness. This converts the female grotesque body into a regressive image of the psychic model of grotesque. In particular, according to Russo, within the process of restructuring of the counter-production of knowledge throughout feminist theory, the carnivalesque has transformed the issues of abjection, marginality, parody and excess into social issues for the symbolic system, where the grotesque and monstrous body is politicised, enhancing the hypothesis of considering a new social subjectivity. This means that the image of a new social subjectivity would dialogue with the notion of social body (that I will expand in the section dedicated to spaces of otherness), theorised by anthropologists like Victor Turner, Mary Douglas or Mariella Pandolfi, where the body is seen as a prototype for the society and for the nation-state or the city.

In liminal areas, thus, the temporary loss of boundaries, as in the case of the carnival, tends to redefine the schemes and the social frames which are finally shown in their fragilities. Russo recognises, however, the effort of historians and anthropologists to consider gender differences in relation to the carnivalesque, accounting Victor Turner's and Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie's works, from where it emerges how carnival festivities could represent places of danger for subaltern subjects, such as what happened in Ancient Rome, where Jews were stoned to death during the Carnival, or women raped. «In other words» Russo says, «in the every day indicative world, women and their bodies, certain bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spaces, are always already transgressive dangerous and in danger». ¹⁶⁵ It is necessary for

¹⁶⁴ Ivi, p.63

¹⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 131

this reason, then, to conceive the basis of a politics of bodies situated within spaces, to reconceptualise the utopian model of carnival which would constitute a safe space and a counter-representative perspective.¹⁶⁶

Similarly, Russo shares the image of the female grotesque with another feminist figuration of monstrosity, that is, Julia Kristeva's theorisation of the abject. As a matter of fact, Russo firstly argues that the Kistevan maternal category of the abject is the act of projection and problematization of the French Bulgarian author towards the grotesque, defined by Kristeva as the «undoer of narcissism and of all imaginary identity as well».¹⁶⁷ Russo reflects on Kristeva's study of abjection, motherhood, and childbirth applied to Celine's work, where a feeling of fear and repulsion for the maternal body appears linked to the fascination for the mother's body in the act of childbirth, as a mixed-up condition of feelings of giving birth as «the height of bloodshed and life, scorching moment of hesitation (between inside and outside, ego and other, life and death), horror and beauty, sexuality and the blunt negation of the sexual».¹⁶⁸ Thus, motherhood is depicted both as abjection and as a life-giver, due to the cyclical power of life and death. Julia Kristeva published *Powers of Horror* in 1982, structuring it as a study of fear throughout the literary works of some of the major 20th century authors, such as Dostoevsky, Proust, Joyce, Céline, etc. Her aim is to show, by doing so, how objection regards the main social taboos towards the materiality of the body, and how these taboos have become a fundamental ingredient in the process of elaboration of the Self for western society. In this work, Kristeva interacts also with psychoanalysis and the Freudian idea of *uncanny*. «The abject» Kristeva explains,

has only one quality of the object-that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me, ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws

¹⁶⁶ Ivi, p. 60-61

¹⁶⁷ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of horror*, Vol. 98. University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 1982, p.208

¹⁶⁸ Ivi, pp. 155-156

me towards the place where meaning collapses. A certain "ego" that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master¹⁶⁹

We can notice, thus, from the very beginning of Kristeva's essay, the dangerous potentiality of abjection, and at the same time the necessity of its existence as a category for alterity, in order to support the structure of the symbolic system. Such potentiality has to do not only with the taboos and disorder and terror, but rather, and in general, with those «dark revolts of being» which are stimulated against a threat coming from «beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable»;¹⁷⁰ in other words, those revolts coming from what it lies close to the Self but which cannot be assimilated by it. Mary Russo agrees with the fact that Kristeva has contributed to interpret abjection as an instrument to scan cultural religious, and historical conventions.

However, my aim here is not to look at the monster according to Kristeva and to investigate it as a projection of psychoanalytic shadows, but rather to focus on the "monster" as a socio-cultural construct and, by doing so, to look at how those shadows have been modelled on Western cultural paradigms; in this case, how they have been modeled by British Gothic and science-fictional literature. Kristeva considers the contribution of cultural anthropology as meaningful for her analysis: by quoting Frazer, van Gennep, Steiner, Brown, Kristeva focuses on the interest for societies, either being primitive societies or contemporary ones, for the «profane defilement» or filth, seen as a category of exclusion (the category of the Improper/Unclean) from which the religious probation comes. Religious rituals of exclusion, in fact, are seen as processes of purification which are adopted by societies in order to set apart a social proof from another, depending on factors of gender, age or due to the "defilement" (filth) categorically assigned to the expelled individual.

¹⁶⁹ Ivi, p. 1-2

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

Defilement, thus, represents for Kristeva what falls out from the symbolic order, it is what

jettisoned from the "symbolic system." It is what escapes that social rationality, that logical order on which a social aggregate is based, which then becomes differentiated from a temporary agglomeration of individuals and, in short, constitutes a classification system or a structure.¹⁷¹

This also confirms the fact that Kristeva's abject can be theorised as the epitome of those taboos that society needs in order to reinforce its inner criteria. This is also confirmed by Kristeva's interest for the British anthropologist Mary Douglas' studies. Douglas, in fact, considers the symbolic system as being based on religious limits as the reflection of social divisions and contradictions, while seeing in the human body the prototype of subjugation and shaping, by means of specific labellings which aim to establish specific codes of cultural coherence in society. Thus, being the body a systemic field of signification and taboos, the acts of separation, exclusion, marginalization, acquire the main scope of making order. In many cultures, however, as Douglas shows, there are powers of pollution. Specifically, these powers up pollution stigmatise, and hence lost moralise, and hence punish, the symbolic rupture between what should be united to society and what separated from it. Those who become responsible for this pollution are always to blame, as producers of wrong conditions of existence and as crosses of boundaries which should not be trespassed.

Such condition, again, is applicable in our case to the interpretation of the embodied subaltern subject as a queer and transhuman monster, since the boundary trespassed by the monster is the territory of the symbolic order, and therefore it represents the dividing line which separates the land of the subject from the land of the abject. Therefore being objection profoundly changed to taboos, prohibitions and moral and cultural bias which define what is acceptable/proper and what is not, we will read and use objection from a feminist and queer perspective as an instrument of exceeding and Crossing

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

of the barriers, moving on the field of literature that becomes, then, necessarily a lie to social and cultural changes.¹⁷² Among the semiotic and cinematic studies which have used Feminist Film Theory as an approach, we may find Barbara Creed's contribution and interpretation of the grotesque related to gender, and in particular her approach to Kristeva's abject.

In her essay *The monstrous-feminine: film, feminism, psychoanalysis*¹⁷³ (1993), Creed rejects the representation of the female character in horror movies as a victim functional to a masculine viewpoint, and based on a Freudian belief of sexual difference that labelled female sexuality as dangerous and associated it to the fearful myth of 'vagina dentata', which would give women the power of castrating males.

However, this Freudian statement, according to Creed, might also have conditioned the representation of the female monster in the cinematic scenario, since, as Creed maintains:

From classical to Renaissance times the uterus was frequently drawn with horns to demonstrate its supposed association with the devil. 'Fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing' (Kristeva, 1982, 77). Margaret Miles argues in her study of the grotesque that 'the most concentrated sense of the grotesque' comes from the image of woman because of her associations with natural events such as sex and birth which were seen as 'quintessentially grotesque'. She points out that in Christian art, hell was often represented as a womb, 'a lurid and rotting uterus' where sinners were perpetually tortured for their crimes (Miles, 1989, 147).¹⁷⁴

The mother, again, is depicted as a prototype of grotesque and abjection, but there are also other declinations of the monstrous femininity, apart from the Archaic Mother (and represented by the Xenomorph from Ridley Scott's *Alien*, 1979), such as the possessed girl from William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, by mixing hysteria and object refusal for the vomit and other dejections from the degraded body, the female lesbian Vampire from Tony Scott's *The Hunger*,

¹⁷² Rodriguez Salas, Gerardo, *Hijas de la Diosa Blanca. Ginocrítica y feminismo restaurador en la narrativa de Katherine Mansfield*, Septem Ediciones, Oviedo, 2007, p. 77

¹⁷³ Creed, Barbara, *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 1993.

¹⁷⁴ Ivi, p.43

the menstruating witch from De Palma's *Carrie*, or the castrating mother-figure from *Psycho*. As Kristeva, Creed explores throughout several horror movies taken as case studies the influence of a masculine system of values on the shaping of the symbolic order, and considers how movies, media and other technologies have become a vehicle to reaffirm stereotyped depictions of female monstrosity, while both reiterating and strengthening how these examples of female monstrosity are destined to the consumption by a male public.

It is clear, then, that the grotesque as a category, as well as the categories of the monstrous and the abject, are automatically invested of an antithetical connotation in relation to the Subject, while acquiring a political value: it is a critique against the models of heteronormative representation and classification, and it also constitutes a strategy of resistance and vindication, while at the same time structuring a new aesthetic and corporeal manifesto from which it is necessary to start in order to shape the picture of an affirmative politics of non-normativity.

This new politics has to be defined according to specific practices of situatedness and contextualization which will be necessary in order to put a given monstrous/abject/grotesque identity within a non-hierarchical web of social, cultural, political and territorial interrelationships.

As we will further see in the following sections, the grotesque subject, as a subject from the margins, represents the identity key-pass which offers the possibility of wandering around the liminal areas of the outer geography, which Slavoj Žižek identified as the "Zone", referring to a place which is not only a marginal area, but also the space of destabilising Otherness.

1.5 The body, performance/performativity, social practices of inclusion and exclusion

In social and cultural anthropology, it is possible to see how the body has represented in each historical and social field the material, symbolic, political and epistemological space upon which to draw and within which to inscribe

an imaginary which has been made of techniques and projections that not only do express our desires, but also and most importantly construct the bodies in a scenario of cultural and ethical values and interrelationships. On this regard, Barbara Henry, in her essay *Dal Golem ai cyborg: trasmissioni dell'immaginario*, literally speaking of “transmigrations of the imaginary”, argues that the body, if seen as a tangible and concrete tool of interaction with the real, external world and together with imagination as a space of artificiality, can have a common point of encounter in what Henry describes as 'transmigration of imaginary'. Moreover, Henry refers to the image of the Golem from the Jewish tradition, representing it as the archetype of non-humanity. The Golem is seen in fact as a process of hybridization between what is natural and what is artificial, exactly like the monster of *Frankenstein*. In other words, imagination is seen as «la modalità del legame tra le figurazioni spirituali create dall'immaginazione, è il cosiddetto tenore del correlato oggettivo, di cui si colora la messa in esercizio, in una data epoca e in un dato luogo, della facoltà dell'immaginazione»¹⁷⁵. The imaginary and its interconnections with the body and its materiality acquire meaning when they refer to specific social, historical and cultural contexts. In this way, a given figuration¹⁷⁶ constitutes a necessary link within the chain of representations, metaphors, re-elaborations, re-adaptations and interpretations, which challenge the centuries and connect the imaginary in a continuous discourse line on corporeality and the strategies of narration.

As already anticipated by Mary Douglas, therefore, the body is not only a physical entity, a representation of a symbolic and social level, being the physical into the social; but rather a synthesis of both these elements. Thus, the social body can be described as a symbolic representation that limits the

¹⁷⁵ “the modality of the link between the spiritual figurations created by the imagination, is the so-called tenor of the objective correlate, which colours the exercise, at a given time and in a given place, of the faculty of imagination. “ (my translation) in Henry, Barbara, *Dal Golem ai cyborgs: trasmissioni nell'immaginario*, Salomone Belforte, 2013., pp.27-28

¹⁷⁶ e.g. in our case the undead posthuman creature (the Creature from *Frankenstein*), the artificial *femme fatale* (Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*), the cyborg, the Animal-Woman (from Carter's *Nights at the Circus* and Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*), the amphibious woman (from Winterson's *The Passion*), the transhuman female-to-male transsexual.

way in which the body is perceived in its materiality, but which also transfers an image of corporeality «as the means by which filtering reality, [since] the social body has to be seen as a natural symbol with which to think about nature, society and culture»¹⁷⁷. However, although Douglas' distinction confirms the dualism between body and mind, where it is evidenced the supremacy of the mind over the body, during the late-20th-century the necessity for a growing number of scholars to find a third term of mediation between nature and culture (which also means mediation between biology and sociology) conveyed into the 1975 ASA conference (Association of Social Anthropologists). The contribution of the American anthropologist Terence Turner with his essay *The social skin*¹⁷⁸ shows how the skin marks the boundary of the individual but also of the social self. The expression 'social skin', in fact, refers to the idea that in each transmission and metamorphosis of identity, the body is considered as the main vehicle of a symbolic communication where its surface is a liminal space between society and the individual. As Turner explains, the 'social' skin defines not individuals, but categories or classes of individuals in terms of its relation with all the others.

There is, therefore, a contingency between Turner's image of the social skin and the theorization of the body as the scenario of a performance which anticipates the feminist theorizations on the body as a field of performativity and gender as performance. According to Marcel Mauss' essay *Les techniques du corps*, for instance, «the performance of the body is generated by uses, customs, cultural influences», whereas Mauss uses the Latin expression of *habitus*, underlining that in society the body becomes the instrument, and it is «the first and must technical object and at the same time the technical means for Man»¹⁷⁹. This brings Mauss to establish a further classification of the multiplicity of the bodily techniques, which differs

¹⁷⁷ Schepher- Hughes, N., & Lock, M., "The mindful body: A prolegomenon to future work in medical anthropology", *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 1 (1), 1987, pp. 6–41, p.7

¹⁷⁸ Turner, Terence S., "The social skin." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2.2, 2012, pp. 486-504.

¹⁷⁹ Mauss, Marcel, *Teoria generale della magia e altri saggi*, Torino, Einaudi, 1961.

according to sex, age, culture and so on. Therefore, the discourse on the performativity of the body and the way in which it becomes a territory upon which to overwrite meaning is fundamental, as we are looking at the categories of the body according to aesthetic and sexual factors which related with the norm and the power generated by that norm. It also becomes important to dwell on which bodies are to be considered normative according to the performativity they employ, given that these bodies move within a scenario that makes them a symbolic construction of individuality, sociality and culture.

In this respect, the binary idea of mind and body conceived by Western society has favoured the mind as the element of formation of the experience of the subject and the body as the place of impurity. Performativity, thus, puts the attention on actions, as the products of a mimetic and behavioural process of certain gestures of certain bodies, which become, while being re-enacted and re-embodied, approved as mundane daily gestures. These mundane daily gestures of the body are, in fact, what produce the self. Performativity, for the body, is described by Judith Butler as a strategy for the "I"'s survival within a binary world.

As Butler shows, together with what Mary Douglas, Marcel Mauss and Victor Turner confirm, there are gestures and signs that a monstrous body performs in order to be classified as such, since its performativity diverges from that spectrum of institutionalised acts that would look at the monster as a normative being, these gestures and signs are mistaken as marks of an authentic original self, and they are coming from an essential core. They crystallise identity making the body as the core and the origin of them, as if they were not an apprehended practice, but rather an inner and innate attitude¹⁸⁰. Butler claims that

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice,

¹⁸⁰ Butler, Judith, *Gender trouble*, Routledge, 1990, p. 33

it is open to intervention and resignification.¹⁸¹ . As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the “congealing” is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. [...] Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.¹⁸²

The queer monster that derives from this divergence from the binarism of gender, performativity and its social normalisation constitutes in its deviance a counterpart to the subject that, as we shall see in the novels of the three authors analysed, destabilises the very idea of performativity associated with the body and the arbitrariness according to which the norm associated with it generates difference.

1.6 The posthuman critique and new antihumanist practices

As explained by Rosi Braidotti in *The Posthuman*¹⁸³, alterity represents the inner essence of the humanist power of Man, intended as an ideal category of white masculinity, normality, youth and health¹⁸⁴, with differences reiterated by this notion of alterity distributed on a hierarchical scale in order to be better controlled. Braidotti includes within this categorization of abnormality, not the anthropomorphic others, but also those intellectual categories which distinguish human beings from animals, or organic beings from other species of creatures, which are classified as pathological versions of being, and therefore expelled from normality. As deduction, posthuman and feminist epistemology aims to track the humanist ontological arrogance and supremacy over what he considers as alterity, or Otherness, and what Derrida calls «carno-phallogentrism», meaning the phagocytting tendency enacted by means of the human/ist power to establish a domain over other creatures,

¹⁸¹ [This is the perfect description of the Rabelaisian/Bakhtinian/Russo's grotesque corporeality

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Braidotti, Rosi, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013.

¹⁸⁴ Ivi, p.68

while practicing an epistemic¹⁸⁵ and material form of violence¹⁸⁶. Humanist philosophy not only states the ideological illusion of human subjectivity, as Louis Althusser argues¹⁸⁷ (1970), but it also aims to challenge that symbolic system representing normative humanist ideology by suggesting new alternatives which should enhance an affirmative politics of becoming (I will come back to the notion of becoming when talking about Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Kafka*), as Braidotti herself theorises identity as an in becoming processes rather than a condition of being. This passage from a static conceptualization of the subject to a dynamic one, which is typical of post-structuralist philosophical speculation, does not only emphasise the performative capabilities of identity, but it also enhances an idea of fluidity and hybridism.

As a mixture of nature and culture, the posthuman body/identity is cyborg, i.e. a hybrid creature.¹⁸⁸

Braidotti, therefore, starting from Dolly the sheep as example of a postanthropocentric society, states that

In many ways, Dolly the sheep is the ideal fi guration for the complex bio-mediated temporalities and forms of intimacy that represent the new post-anthropocentric human–animal interaction. She/it is simultaneously the last specimen of her species – descended from the lineage of sheep that were conceived and reproduced as such – and the fi rst specimen of a new species: the electronic sheep that Philip K. Dick dreamed of, the forerunner of the androids society of *Blade Runner* (1982). Cloned, not conceived sexually, heterogeneous mix of organism and machine, Dolly has become delinked from reproduction and hence divorced from descent. Dolly is no daughter of any member of

¹⁸⁵ Epistemic violence refers to any form of abuse of power exercised through knowledge, often used in poststructuralist and postcolonial philosophy (e.g. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) and Michel Foucault in *Folie et Dérison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, 1961) over a subordinate minority. This occurs through a process of appropriation of the voice of the category of the Other by the dominating subject. Specifically, Derrida refers here to the epistemic violence used by humanist thought on all other forms of non-human experience.

¹⁸⁶ Ivi, p. 68

¹⁸⁷ Althusser, Louis, "Ideology and ideological state apparatuses (notes towards an investigation)." *The anthropology of the state: A reader* 9.1, 2006, pp. 86-98.

¹⁸⁸ (see also Haraway, Donna, "A cyborg manifesto: Science, technology, and socialist-feminism in the late 20th century." *The international handbook of virtual learning environments*. Springer, Dordrecht, 2006. 117-158., 1st ed. 1983)

her/its old species – simultaneously orphan and mother of her/itself. First of a new gender, she/it is also beyond the gender dichotomies of the patriarchal¹⁸⁹ kinship system¹⁹⁰.

Posthumanism was therefore born as an aftermath of the revolutionary anti-humanist wave which resulted from the 1968 generation; the same generation from which post-structuralist philosophy took root, mainly in France. As Rosi Braidotti shows, it was assumed that the universal idea of Man was far from being Leonardo Da Vinci's Vitruvian model of perfection, and therefore represented a prototype conceived on an unconventional and progressive ideal of perfectibility and self-determination (the expression *homo faber suae fortunae* became a commonly shared motto during the Humanist and Renaissance period) as a socio-historical construct and therefore was contingent and variable according to places and values. The notion mortality is necessary to the humanist subject in order to enunciate an identity model which will assess Otherness and establish systematic criteria of conventionality. The human is then a normative convention that contributes to the establishment of practices of exclusion and discrimination. The human standard, Braidotti claims,

functions by transposing a specific mode of being human into a generalized standard, [...] categorically and qualitatively distinct from the sexualized, racialized, naturalized others and also in opposition to the technological artefact. The human is a historical construct that became a social convention about 'human nature'.¹⁹¹

The 1970's constituted a crucial moment of re-theorization and reflection of the European culture. The French philosopher and anthropologist Frantz Fanon claimed that Europeans had, in fact, misinterpreted and spoiled the humanist ideal, while adapting it to a Eurocentric vision of the world, one which implied an image of whiteness as the ideal of beauty according to the Vitruvian

¹⁸⁹ Ivi, p.74

¹⁹⁰ Ivi, p.82

¹⁹¹ Ivi, p.26

ideal. Hence, this gravity and stagnation of the humanist view of the world made the rise of postcolonialist thought, which suggested the idea of an openness to new frontiers of culture, which were necessary to deconstruct the Eurocentric point of view, and carve milestones of a cultural change coming from outside European contexts.

It is also for this reason that that the attention that needs to be paid to authors such as Mary Shelley, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson should be addressed to authors who have used the humanist paradigm and its aesthetic conventions to whom this paradigms have referred to for centuries while deconstructing the structure of the male white subject as an ideal of perfection. It is for an analogous reason, therefore, that the so-called philosophers of difference, such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Rosi Braidotti, have highlighted the ethnocentric and arbitrary nature of Western universalism, defending the need to confront and open to the internalised/interiorised Otherness.¹⁹² A feminist humanism, in fact, differs from the universalist view of conventional humanism, based on an abstract ideal of Man as the white, European, gorgeous, normal, heterosexual being. On the contrary, a feminist (post)humanism is inspired by a situated knowledge of the world and experiences¹⁹³, which in turn moves from a politics of location theorised by Adrienne Rich in 1987. The topic of situatedness in feminist theory from the third-wave feminism has questioned the role of identity joined with the context and the socio-cultural background of each located experience. The third-wave feminist theorist and artist Trinh T. Minh-ha expresses the importance of identitary difference and the multiplicity of subjectivities in feminism, In *Not you/Like you*, she asks herself

How am I to lose, maintain, or gain a female identity when it is impossible for me to take up a position outside this identity from which I presumably reach in and feel for

¹⁹² Kristeva, Julia, *Strangers to ourselves*. Columbia University Press, 1991.

¹⁹³ Haraway, Donna, "Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective." *Feminist studies* 14.3, 1988, pp. 575-599.

it? Difference in such a context is that which undermines the very idea of identity, differing to infinity the layers of totality that forms I¹⁹⁴.

The experience of the individual is connected with the individual physical belonging to a place in the world, which determines the individual's privileges, as well as the individual's social, cultural and economical condition of advantage or disadvantage, and so on. This feminist revision of the perception of the self will not only, in 1980's, translate postmodernism into the point of view of a theoretical feminism, but it will also enhance an idea of the body as an incarnate subject, anticipating a new and more accurate analysis of power.

As Braidotti claims, anti-humanist feminism is anticipated by the Foucauldian notion of power as *potestas*, meaning the restrictive force, and of power as *potentia*, meaning productive force. The incoherence and the precarity of the dominating narratives concerning the social structure and its relations induces to reflect on the nomadic structure of the social systems and the subjects inhabiting them. As Braidotti maintains, «if power is complex, scattered and productive, so must be our resistance to it.» [if Power is complex, expanded and productive, so it must be our resistance to it]¹⁹⁵. As shown in section 1.1 of this chapter, and as repeated by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*,¹⁹⁶ in the relationship between systems of power and the dichotomy of normal and abnormal, the discourse constitutes the product of the relationship between the subjects and the political actuality, which is assigned to certain meanings, therefore charged with scientific validity. As a consequence of this naturalising process, it is necessary to adopt a new materialist methodology which will aim to dismantle the conviction based upon natural foundations of codified and socially imposed differences. The anti-humanist feminism, therefore, also known as postmodern feminism,

¹⁹⁴ Trinh, T. Minh-ha, "Not you/like you: Post-colonial women and the interlocking questions of identity and difference." *Inscriptions* 3, 1988, pp. 71-77.

¹⁹⁵ Braidotti, Rosi, *The Posthuman*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 27

¹⁹⁶ Notice that *Discipline and Punish* was published only a year after the Collège de France course on *Abnormality* in 1975. I would consider both Foucault's studies as synchronic and intercommunicative between each other.

rejects the identitary unitarism of humanist philosophy while affirming the impossibility, ignored by European post-structuralism, to speak while adopting a unique and absolute voice that would ventriloquise women's, natives' and other peripheral subjects' experiences. As we have already seen, science fiction and Gothic fiction are two literary genres where the discourse on what is human, what is not human and what are the boundaries between these categories, is perfect in order to show the radical terror towards the transformed human subject. In the introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, Andy Mousley reflects on the phenomenon of de-humanization operated by contemporary capitalism, and which brings to the consumption of the brand and to take the place of the being, and quotes N. Katherine Hayles' statement that «We have always been posthuman», meaning that there has always been in History a tendency to deconstruct an anthropocentric idea of the world, as demonstrated by figures like Galileo Galilei, Friedrich Nietzsche, or Charles Darwin. What Hayles is saying is that «the posthuman names a tendency internal to the human condition itself», meaning that there has always been a countertendency to the humanist norm and its power; therefore the posthuman, together with its variants of “the inhuman”, “subhuman”, “superhuman”, “antihuman” and “transhuman”, has shadowed the Human and the idea of intactness of humanity.¹⁹⁷

One of the posthuman perspectives furnished by the feminist methodology is the resignification of animalization, defined by M. S. Roberts¹⁹⁸ as the “rendering non-human of humans”¹⁹⁹, which has long been used as a strategy of power enacted by the symbolic system and by the cultural imagery to justify domination and exploitation of those categories regarded as “inferior human groups” on the base of racial, religious, sexual and ethical factors. In this

¹⁹⁷ Hayles, N. Katherine, *How we became posthuman*, University of Chicago Press, 1999, p.291. Quoted in Mousley, Andrew, *The Cambridge Companion to Frankenstein*, Cambridge University Press, 2016.

¹⁹⁸ Roberts, Mark S., *The mark of the beast: Animality and human oppression*. Purdue University Press, 2008., p. x

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

sense, Braidotti underlines the contribution of post-structuralism in the shaping of new practices of re-evaluation of the difference conceived as a non-hierarchical landing point, such as the Deleuzian and Guattarian 'becoming-animal', theorised in their essay *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (*Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*),²⁰⁰ published 1975, the same year of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. According to Paolo Vignola, the line traced by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari seems in fact to anticipate and inspire the posthuman perspective, as the Deleuzian becoming-animal constitutes an act of hybridization that starts from the desire of ringing to a permanent identitarian modification and the deconstruction of the very essence of the human being.

As much Deleuze as the posthumanist philosophy agree to conceive an alternative identity to the one based on pure essence, and thus to reflect on an ethics which will give space and signification to non-human alterities (Otherness). The Deleuzian becoming-animal is not only a point of conjunction between the subject and the other, but rather a process of deconstruction and de-identification of the subject and the other, with the proposal of establishing a true strategy of alliance, imaginary or symbolic. As Deleuze and Guattari explain,

To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves, to find a world of pure intensities where all forms come undone, as do all the significations, signifiers, and signifieds, to the benefit of an unformed matter of de-territorialized flux, of nonsignifying signs²⁰¹.

When referring to Franz Kafka's works and the process of animalization as case studies, Deleuze and Guattari claim that

²⁰⁰ Deleuze, Gilles, *Kafka: Toward a minor literature*. Vol. 30. University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

²⁰¹ Ivi, p. 13

Kafka's animals never refer to a mythology or to archetypes but correspond solely to new levels, zones of liberated intensities where contents free themselves from their forms as well as from their expressions, from the signifier that formalized them²⁰².

The becoming-animal expresses not only an ethical-political necessity, meaning the search for an escape from the human obligations and limitations (e.g. Gregor Samsa from *The Metamorphosis* who becomes a beetle to escape from his bureaucratic routine embracing the abjection of becoming-insect), but also the search for an ontological alliance between the human and the animal, as embodied prototypes for otherness. Such observation on the hybrid process of evolution of a human being as a becoming subject brings to an epistemological process of 'anthropo-de-centrism'²⁰³

The aim is to elaborate a new methodology of confrontation with non-human alterities, whether biological (Shelley), transgender (Carter and Winterson) or technological (Shelley and Winterson), a methodology that will trace a new eco-philosophical horizon, as defined by Guattari. Furthermore, the process of *becoming-animal* is also described by the French philosophers as *becoming minoritarian*, just as Kafka's literature is defined as a 'minor literature'. Therefore, this indicates that:

1) the power of a minor literature is an anti-Oedipal act, as it contrasts the colonising force of the literary canon, which rejects the form of becoming of literature as a phenomenon of cultural re-discussion and de-classification²⁰⁴;

2) the act of becoming-animal aims to save the individual from the logics of power, of homologation and rigid social coding. It is, in other words, a political

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ the anomaly becomes animality, and thus a pathology, only when the environment becomes hostile towards this diversity; otherwise, the anomalous element could not be considered as a healthy one, but it could also represent the starting point as much of a species as of the individual." [my translation] Vignola, Paolo, "Divenire-animale. La teoria degli affetti di Gilles Deleuze tra etica ed etologia." *Emotività animali. Ricerche e discipline a confronto*. Milano: Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2013.

²⁰⁴ Braidotti, Rosi, *In metamorfosi: verso una teoria materialista del divenire*. Feltrinelli Editore, 2003., p.154

instrument of emancipation, as the animal, seen as a figuration of another otherness, offers new escaping strategies from the logics of power.²⁰⁵

I would like to add that becoming-animal, similarly to *becoming-monster*, has to be read as a process of *becoming-anomaly*. This is because, as Vignola explains,

L'anomalia diviene anormale, dunque patologica, solo quando l'ambiente si rende ostile nei confronti di questa diversità, altrimenti l'elemento anomalo non solo può rientrare nella salute, ma può essere il trampolino di lancio tanto della specie quanto dell'individuo²⁰⁶.

To conclude, in relation to the symbolic cultural imaginary and to feminist practices, the becoming-animal process becomes a strategy necessary not only to re-signify the animalization of the woman-subject-as-Other, associated in a canonical imaginary to an idea of subalternity and inferiority, inhumanity and beastliness, but also to subvert the dominant logic, by seeing animalization and monstrosity as empowerment, while converting it into a counter-narrative technique of resistance to the symbolic system.

The process of the political resignification of the alterity/anomaly, thus, adopts hybridity and becoming(ness) as necessary ways to overcome the biological boundaries of the body and identity. As Daniela Daniele explains in her preface to the anthology *Meduse Cyborg*,

I corpi che contano di Judith Butler, le donne cyborg di Donna Haraway, attraversano il corpo femminile per trascenderne i limiti biologici. Come quello del travestito, dello sciamano, il corpo della donna-medusa esce così potenziato, assumendo insieme i poteri del maschio e della femmina, come fa Diamanda Galás nel suo uso amplificato e non solistico della voce (über-voice), o Laurie Anderson, quando assume un timbro di voce maschile grazie a un altro strumento elettronico, il vocoder. Così come la performance reinventa i limiti dell'arte, questi corpi di donna appaiono mutevoli,

²⁰⁵ Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari, *Mille piani. Capitalismo e schizofrenia*, Orthotes, 2021, p. 114

²⁰⁶ "Anomaly becomes abnormality, and therefore pathology only when the environment becomes hostile to this diversity, otherwise the abnormal element may not only be healthy, but it may be the starting point for both the species and the individual." [my translation] in Vignola, Paolo, "Divenire-animale. La teoria degli affetti di Gilles Deleuze tra etica ed etologia." *Emotività animali. Ricerche e discipline a confronto*. Milano: Edizioni Universitarie di Lettere Economia Diritto, 2013, p.123

permeabili, queer, alludendo alla possibilità di riformulare il proprio destino oltre il senso comune, producendo insoliti paradossi.²⁰⁷

1.7 Liminality, queer heterotopias and embodied marginalities

Before focusing on the potentiality of an anti-structure characterised by such spaces as heterotopias and situated knowledges, it is fundamental to introduce the term 'liminality' and to explain how this term has influenced cultural anthropology, poststructuralist philosophy, gender criticism and feminist literature, towards the shaping of a politics of representation of alternative spaces and corporealities.

As Loren March comments in *Queer and trans* geography of liminality* (2020), in fact, liminality is often framed by geographers in terms of deviance from the norm, as an uncertain socio-spatial encounter with otherness or as a temporary eruption of radical emancipatory possibility.²⁰⁸ However, as March specifies, queer and trans liminalities are often absent from these accounts. We should figure the liminal space as an ongoing dynamic and lived condition of becoming and transformation, putting a strain on the normative structure of social spaces. We must consider, in this context, liminality not only as a concept related to monstrosity and grotesqueness, and thus as an empowering element of unboundedness, fluidity, multiplicity and non-linear becoming. Rather, one of my aims is to approach liminality as a methodological and epistemological tool for the re-vision of literary feminist and queer studies or, as Elizabeth Grosz observes, to see liminality (or the so

²⁰⁷ "Judith Butler's bodies that matter, Donna Haraway's cyborg women, cross the female body to transcend its biological limits. Like that of the transvestite, of the shaman, the body of the Medusa-woman comes out so enhanced, assuming together the powers of the male and the female, as Diamanda Galás does in her amplified and not solo use of the voice (über-voice), or Laurie Anderson, when she takes on a male voice timbre thanks to another electronic instrument, the vocoder. Just as performance reinvents the limits of art, these women's bodies appear changeable, permeable, queer, alluding to the possibility of reformulating one's destiny beyond common sense, producing unusual paradoxes" [my translation] in Daniele, Daniela, *Meduse cyborg. Antologia di donne arrabbiate di Re/Search*, Shake, 1997, p. 10.

²⁰⁸ March, Loren, "Queer and trans* geographies of liminality: A literature review." *Progress in Human Geography* 45.3, 2021, pp. 455-471., p.455

called 'in-betweenness') as a posthuman practice of realignment between identity and social, cultural and natural transformations²⁰⁹:

The model of an in-betweenness, of an indeterminacy or undecidability, pervades the writings of contemporary philosophers, including Deleuze, Derrida, Serres, and Irigaray, where it goes under a number of different names: difference, repetition, iteration, the interval, among others. The space in between things is the space in which things are undone, the space to the side and around, which is the space of subversion and fraying, the edges of any identity's limits. In short, it is the space of the bounding and undoing of the identities which constitute it.²¹⁰

It is also due to this potentiality of dismantling of these spaces that Grosz sees in-between territories as prolific metaphors for feminist and postmodern discourse practices, also due to the contestation of many binaries and dualisms that dominate Western knowledge, including phallogocentrism, ethnocentrism, and Eurocentrism, and the general practice of identity erasure²¹¹.

The term 'liminality' was first investigated in cultural anthropology by the French philosopher Arnold van Gennep in his essay *The rites of passage*²¹² (*Les rites de passage*, 1960), where he classifies rites of passage as acts of change within the life of an individual, which require the crossing of different statuses, conditions, ages and places. Rites of passage mainly refer to the way in which people are socially redistributed within society. Van Gennep

²⁰⁹ "My argument will deal explicitly with the implications of what might be described as a posthumanist understanding of temporality and identity, an understanding that is bound up with seeing politics, movement, change, as well as space and time, in terms of the transformation and realignment of the relations between identities and elements rather than in terms of the identities, intentions, or interiorities of the wills of individuals or groups. An openness to futurity is the challenge facing all of the arts, sciences, and humanities; the degree of openness is an index of one's political alignments and orientations, of the readiness to transform." in Grosz, Elizabeth, *Architecture from the outside: Essays on virtual and real space*. MIT press, 2001., p.91

²¹⁰ Ivi, p.91

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Van Gennep, Arnold, *Les rites de passage: étude systématique des rites de la porte et du seuil, de l'hospitalité, de l'adoption, de la grossesse et de l'accouchement, de la naissance, de l'enfance, de la puberté, de l'initiation, de l'ordination, du couronnement des fiançailles et du mariage, des funérailles, des saisons, etc.* Vol. 5. É. Nourry, 1909.

clarifies that, in order for a rite of passage to be accomplished, the individual must experience three main stages:

- 1) **separation**;
- 2) **margin**²¹³;
- 3) **re-aggregation** to a social group.

Like the Bakhtinian category of carnivalesque, just as the definitions of alterity, abjection and transgression, the concept of liminality has also featured debates about the space within sociology, cultural anthropology and cultural geography. Victor Turner, in his essay *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*²¹⁴ (1982), will come back to van Gennep's idea of liminality in order to establish a dialogue with his theory of the 'performance'. It is the second phase of van Gennep's trinomial system of passages, the margin, the one on which Turner focuses, while distinguishing, in turn, between the liminal and the liminoid.

Liminality is, for Turner (while van Gennep does not clarify that) a rupture moment, and non-cyclical breakthrough, it is not a gradual passage (separation → liminality → reaggregation), but rather a radical, irreversible change, which aims to a simultaneous transformation of the previous symbolic and social structures. By doing so, according to Turner, it is possible to introduce, within a social assessment, new values and new symbolic categories which should acquire a collective dimension. The crisis generated by the liminal actions reveals the scheme of the challenge going on between different factions among a given social group. Therefore, the challenge in our case would occur between the heterosexist system and the monstrous otherness/queer corporeality.

Liminality, as Turner shows, must be read as a metaphoric process, since the symbols, he explains, are not merely meta-historical or a-historical conditions,

²¹³ the condition of liminality, from Latin '*limen*', means 'border'.

²¹⁴ Turner, Victor, *From ritual to theatre: The human seriousness of play*. Performing arts journal publ., 1998.

but they rather take part in our structural processuality, while both acquiring structural and anti-structural socio-cultural values.²¹⁵

The rites of passage, then, are no longer to be seen scene but as symbolic processes²¹⁶. Consequently, Turner individuates a major difference between the liminal action and the liminoid one: while, in the first practice, the individual is obliged to enact a marginalising, transitional experience outside the community, at the end of which the individual will return to society, during the second practice of liminoidity, typical of the post-industrial contemporary Western world, this is related to the notion of leisure, i.e. «after-work activity of entertainment»²¹⁷. However, Turner evidences how, in this kind of society, liminal and liminoid coexist, establishing a dialogue between the symbolic and reality. In a performative sense, this means to observe the representations of a distorted reality, as the science fiction and the Gothic imaginary do, in order to produce experiences and meanings throughout active subjects.²¹⁸ . It is correct to consider, hence, the representation of "drag" according to Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* as a liminoid junction point with Turner's theory. Butler, in fact, recognises Turner's merit of theorising a theatre of 'performance as change', while aiming to dismantle and deconstruct those conventions which will limit the imaginary of reality.²¹⁹

Butler, as a matter of fact, identifies the parody of drag as a figuration and as a subversive strategy of repetition, since the drag, while "dramatising" gender, is implicitly revealing the arbitrary and imitative structure of gender itself, and that gender performances are governed by punishing heteronormative social

²¹⁵ Filimon, Eliza Claudia, *Heterotopia in Angela Carter's Fiction: Worlds in Collision*. Anchor Academic Publishing (aap_verlag), 2014.

²¹⁶ Turner, Victor Witter, Paola Capriolo, and Stefano De Matteis. *Dal rito al teatro*, Il mulino, Bologna, 1986.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Gemini, Laura, *Liminoide. Modi dello "stare fra" dalla teoria della performance alla contingenza del moderno*, [<https://www.darsmagazine.it/> ; ultimo accesso: 05/08/2021]

²¹⁹ Butler, Judith, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Dec., 1988, pp. 519-531, p. 90

conventions²²⁰. The relationship between the symbolic value of the liminoid action and the connection with the non-normative identity can be configured within the space which acquires the potentiality of being a counter-narrative incarnated point of view for the category of Alterity.

Henri Lefebvre sees daily-life as a political battlefield, where change may occur by means of forms and heterogeneous spaces that are opposed to capitalism. Space is viewed in its physical form (spatial practice), its space of knowledge and its logical value (representations of space), and invested with symbolism and meaning. Representational spaces, instead, resist dominant social relations and are «embodying complex symbolism, sometimes coded, sometimes not», and they involve the use of those places that have been left out of the spaces of capitalism, but they offer an advantageous perspective from which the production of space can be rendered visible and critically viewed²²¹. The representations of space refer to how space is conceived by engineers, cartographers, architects, and bankers through plans, designs, drawings and maps. Speaking about places and imaginary spaces charged with political potentiality, Lefebvre distinguished between 'critical isotopias' (analogous-homogeneous places communicating with each other), 'utopias' (non-places, lit. Greek *ou-tópos/eu-topos*: non-place/good place) and 'heterotopias' (mutually opposing places), referring to Foucault's theory of spaces of marginalization.

On this regard, in his essay *Discipline and Punish: The birth of Prison*, Michel Foucault analysed the evolution of the systems of repression of criminality throughout Middle Age and Modern history. In particular, Foucault studied the passage from the practice of punishment as an act of public exposure of pain used as a warning for the community, during the Middle and Modern Age, to the gradual concealment of the criminal individual to a space which was

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Lefebvre, Henri, and Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The production of space*. Vol. 142. Blackwell, Oxford, 1991.

outside from the normative, civilised society, but not out of the eye of Power; or, as Foucault calls it, the 'biopolitics'.

Biopolitics, for Foucault, aims to «treat the population as a set of coexisting living beings with particular biological and pathological features, and which as such falls under specific forms of knowledge and technique»²²². These knowledges and techniques are applied in order to favor the interests of capitalism. Foucault, in fact, explains how biopower was useful during the development of capitalism since it helped to exercise a control of bodies into the machinery of production and the adaptation of the population to the economic processes, and it articulates throughout the control of life through policies, practices and regulations, a connection between bodies/identities (called 'microphysics of power') and populations/identity categories (called 'macropower'). Thus, Foucault denounces the role of prison as a place where the biopower exercises a control on the body, in order to create, with the implementation of discipline, the model of the "docile body", a prototype of citizen which embodies the ideal figure to represent the capitalist and neo-liberist society, whereas bodies are rendered functional to fabrics, economy, politics, war and education. Foucault explains how this image of a docile body derives from the classical age, when it was discovered that the body could become an object and target of power:

It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body - to the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces. The great book of Man-the-Machine was written simultaneously on two registers: the anatomico-metaphysical register, of which Descartes wrote the first pages and which the physicians and philosophers continued, and the technico-political register, which was constituted by a whole set of regulations and by empirical and calculated methods relating to the army, the school and the hospital, for controlling or correcting the operations of the body. These two registers are quite distinct, since it was a question, on the one hand, of submission and use and, on the other, of functioning and explanation: there was a useful body and an intelligible body. And yet there are points of overlap from one to the other. La Mettrie's *L'Homme-machine* is both a materialist reduction of the soul and a general theory of dressage, at the centre of which reigns the notion of 'docility', which joins the analysable body to the manipulable body. A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved. The celebrated automata, on the other hand, were

²²² Foucault, Michel, *Security, territory, population: lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*. Springer, 2007, p. 367

not only a way of illustrating an organism, they were also political puppets, small-scale models of power: Frederick II, the meticulous king of small machines, well-trained regiments and long exercises, was obsessed with them.²²³

The docile body is the final result of a process of subjugation exercised by power over the individual with the aim of generating normative identities. Any experience of identity that emerges from this process of subjugation of the docile body constitutes a deviation from the norm, and it is therefore to be considered abnormal, hence grotesque/monstrous. The systemic production of the docile body, then, is only possible through the acceptance of discipline as a shared value within society, which brings Foucault to explore the structure of the Panopticon.

'Panopticon', that we will explore further in Chapter Three, is a term coined by the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham's idea of a jail model plan called Panopticon (lit. from Greek, "all-observing-eye"), which would ideally give a security guard the possibility to observe the entire prison and its inmates by means of its rotunda structure. The Panopticon induces the inmates (and, to an extent, society) to feel observed by a guardian eye, the eye of the Law, and to behave while respecting the laws and rules that constitute the jail's (and by an extent, society's) right conduct. Foucault, therefore, theorises the existence and advocates the necessity for counterspaces of resistance against the Panopticon model enhanced by biopower. Such spaces will represent an escape from the attempt of being reduced to a forced normalization and submission by Law. These counterspaces for otherness, which are liminal and peripheral to normative spaces, are called by Foucault 'heterotopias'²²⁴, as heterotopias represent a field in which the (anti)subjects who inhabit it are moving within it while knowing that they are consciously exceeding the parameters of conventionality, of the controlled and normative universe, they are entering an outer dimension of wilderness, of non-

²²³ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of Prison*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012, p. 136

²²⁴ Foucault, Michel, "Of other spaces*(1967)." *Heterotopia and the city*. Routledge, 2008, pp. 25-42.

classification, a space of sublimeness, of fear of the Abject as embodied counterpart of the Subject. As Foucault clarifies, within the range of ideal spaces, there are utopias, which are defined as

the sites with no real space [...] that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.²²⁵

Foucault's clarification of utopias as 'unreal spaces' is necessary to anticipate his theorisation of heterotopias, which are, on the contrary, real spaces where difference from the norm is located.

There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places- places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society-which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias. I believe that between utopias and these quite other sites, these heterotopias, there might be a sort of mixed, joint experience, which would be the mirror. The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.²²⁶

As Foucault explains, therefore, in heterotopias there is a utopian component because in these spaces the subject who is relegated to the margin has the possibility of "seeing themselves". At the same time, the subject of heterotopia

²²⁵ Foucault, Michel, and Jay Miskowicz, "Of other spaces." *diacritics* 16.1, 1986, pp. 22-27, p.24

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

sees himself from a space of the margin that is opposed to that of the norm. It is thus a subject that recognises its own status as a subject and at the same time its own condition as a monster, which has led it to be ousted from the space of the norm.

From a feminist perspective, then, the role assigned to a space of resistance and marginalization is inevitably charged of a political and innovative function, as shown by Angela Jones' definition of queer heterotopias. This is related to the discourse on identity and spaces, where both must be considered as according to the development of cultural, historical and geographical models:

Queer heterotopias are a radical post-human vision where nothing is fixed and there are no boundaries, and no hierarchies. These are spaces with no ordered categories that qualify and rank bodies. This will require the radical transformation of bodies, subversive performances, and transforming our minds, our souls, and our thoughts.²²⁷

Jones also clarifies the subversive role of boundaries, since in the queer heterotopian topography boundaries become a position of contrast/opposition and resistance to phallogentric representation of the subject and of the subaltern experience.

As anticipated in section 1.3, 'thirdspaces' can also be assimilated to the «cyborg subject position» identified by Donna Haraway in *The promises of Monsters*. I believe, in fact, that situated knowledges and politics of location, or, by extension, the practices of situated subjectivities, are complementary instruments of interruption of the normative imaginary.

In *Beyond "Gynocriticism" and Gynesis: The Geographics of Identity and the Future of Feminist Criticism*, Susan Stanford Friedman advocates the necessity of considering identity as the fundamental starting point from where to construct a "geographics of identity", defining a «new, rapidly moving,

²²⁷ Jones, Angela, "Queer heterotopias: Homonormativity and the future of queerness." *InterAlia: Pismo poświęcone studiom queer* 4, 2009, p.15

magnetic field of Identity studies»²²⁸ which does not only promote a non-static idea of cultural disciplines, boundaries, central and peripheral mappings, but also looks at identity as the necessary change from the wholeness of a previous idea of identity to the multiplicity, fragmentation and intersection of the postmodern self. This new geography, that Friedman defines as a “non static space – or field”,

performs a kind of dialectic that reflects opposing movements in the world today revolving around the issue of identity. There is, on the one hand, the erection of boundaries between people, ever more intent on difference, on distinctions between selves and others, whether based on history or biology or both, as a form of dominance or resistance. There is, on the other hand, the search both material and Utopian for fertile borderlands, for the liminal spaces in-between, the sites of constant movement and change, the locus of syncretist intermingling and hybrid interfusions of self and other. This dialectic between difference and sameness is embedded in the double meaning of the word identity itself. Identity is constructed relationally through difference from the other; identification with a group based on gender, race, or sexuality, for example, depends mostly on binary systems of "us" versus "them" where difference from the other defines the group to which one belongs. Conversely, identity also suggests sameness, as in the word identical; an identity affirms some form of commonality, some shared ground. Difference versus sameness; stasis versus travel; certainty versus interrogation; purity versus mixing: the geographies of identity moves between boundaries of difference and borderlands of liminality.²²⁹

Friedman also considers the attention to six discourses of identity which are functional to the construction of her "geographics of identity"; that is to say, multiple oppression, multiple subject positions, contradictory subject positions, relationality, situatedness, hybridity. It is important to consider, therefore, the historical and material embeddedness that permeates the geographical rhetoric of positionality and how this historical and material embeddedness has influenced the development of the discourse on female monstrosity through ages. As Stanford Friedman comments,

²²⁸ Friedman, Susan Stanford, "" Beyond" Gynocriticism and Gynesis: The Geographics of Identity and the Future of Feminist Criticism." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 15.1, 1996, pp.13-40, p.14

²²⁹ Ivi, p.15

I am reading Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* to some extent as a descendant of Gynesis [queer studies]. Her radical challenge to the concept of the "feminine" or "woman" can be regarded as the ultimate disruption of western discourses of identity and thus as an inheritor (of sorts) of the project of Gynesis.²³⁰

It should be specified that with the term "Gynesis", Friedman refers to the expression coined by Elaine Showalter and taken up by Alice Jardine to identify those «theoretical readings of the feminine as a discursive effect that interrupts the main narrative of Western culture»²³¹, and which inserts into the wider field of Gynocriticism, i.e. "the historical study of women writers as a distinct literary tradition."²³²

We must, hence, consider not only the difference of literary ages that differentiates Mary Shelley from Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson, but also their subjectivity, their characters and their narratives as culturally embedded products belonging to different ages and different contexts. However, we must premise that this discourse on boundaries and embeddedness is being applied to three European writers who are embedded within the Western literary tradition. Consequently, their situatedness will refer to the condition of three white European women. Nevertheless, their literary works enact parallel processes of renegotiation with their male Western humanism and the Law of the Father, which has influenced their cultural and literary background. This is evident in Mary Shelley's literary process, since she subverts canonical parameters of a genre while working within the tradition of Gothic fiction and at the same time overturning its standards while not using in *Frankenstein* a female, victimised character as a protagonist of the novel, which is what the tradition of Female Gothic would expect from Shelley. Rather, Shelley chose deliberately to focus on a male character playing a «homoerotic fantasy of omnipotence»²³³, as Anne K. Mellor defines

²³⁰ Ivi, p.39

²³¹ Ivi, p. 14

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, New York, Methuen, 1988, p.63

Victor Frankenstein's creative process, and playing with the idea of identity and normativity throughout the dichotomy of Victor vs. the Creature.

To conclude, the role of liminality will help this research to reflect on the boundaries between inside and outside, not as rigid but as fluid parameters, which are being constantly negotiated and representing alternative scenarios for alternative realities. This heterotopian queer landscape opposed to the civilised community is also joined by Jacques Derrida's image of the 'crypt'²³⁴, whereas in opposition to the image of the 'forum', the crypt «constructs another, more inward forum... sealed and thus internal to itself, a secret interior within the public square, but, by the same token, outside it, external to the interior»²³⁵.

Spaces of margins and marginalised identities are interrelated and exchanging meanings. In Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, for instance, the desert is not only a heterotopian space but also an allegory of Eve/lyn's splitting and erased identitary condition, a 'blank space' of potentiality, performativity, action and counter-resistance from where the protagonist moves his search. The reflection on American postmodern places made by Jean Baudrillard in his travelogue *America* is useful in this analysis. The French philosopher focuses not only on the geologic and metaphysical monumentality of the American desert, but also on the sublime and trans-political spaces of the extra-terrestrial, a critique of culture, describing the desertic scenario of America as a «photographic negative of the terrestrial surface and its civilized spirits»²³⁶. The desert in Baudrillard constitutes both the symbols of emptiness and a challenge against the wholeness status of the identity of the Western normative subject, just as it occurs in *Frankenstein* with the frame-story set on the Arctic poles, or with the monster's monologue at the Chamounix glacier, when Victor and the Creature face each other (the

²³⁴ Derrida, Jacques, "Foreword: Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok." *The Wolf Man's magic word: A cryptonymy*, 1986, pp. xi-il. p.xiv

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Baudrillard, Jean, *America*, Verso, 1986.

Subject vs. the Abject), or as the Wrecked City in Winterson's *The Stone Gods*.

Chapter Two

Mary Shelley's Monstrous Figurations and Spaces for alterity

2.1 Introduction: The Shaping of a Monster

In this discussion on the subversive power of the category of the monstrous and the boundaries that distinguish it from the definition of the subject as its exact and radical opposition as otherness and abjectness, Mary Shelley's work constitutes a starting point and paradigm of primary relevance. This is especially true if we contextualise, in a diachronic approach, the influence that *Frankenstein* (1st edition: 1818) had on Gothic literature of the nineteenth century, in the discourse on the sublime which began in the eighteenth century, and finally in the deep interconnection that exists between the Creature of Frankenstein and feminist criticism, for which Frankenstein's creation has represented a figuration of subalternity and denial of the subject's status. This discourse is also intertwined here with the comparative analysis of another of Mary Shelley's novels.

The Last Man, published in 1826, is a post-apocalyptic novel which expands Shelley's exploration of the monstrous and extends the political charge assumed by the monster's figuration by extending its bodily monstrosity to the entire human race through epidemic, contagion, and death by plague. In fact, as we will see, in the case of Frankenstein's Creature the monstrous is circumscribed to the reanimated corpse, which epitomises Julia Kristeva's image of the abject. This is contrasted by the normative and specular subject represented by Victor Frankenstein in an oppositional dichotomy that anticipates the specularity of the Second Gothic Wave of the late-1800s. Well-known comparisons include, for instance, Dorian Gray vs. his portrait, Doctor Jekyll vs. Mister Hyde, Dracula vs. A Victorian Englishman (e.g. Jonathan Harker), etc. This subject resides in dark, unexplored, and wild places far from the civilised world and yet connected to it.

Conversely, however, in *The Last Man* monstrosity takes over the individual, while also crossing social and bodily boundaries, annihilating the social oppositions and political currents of which the characters of the events are made protagonists. Therefore, abjection and the grotesque overflow the borders of otherness in order to nullify those very boundaries. As already anticipated by Jane Aaron,²³⁷ such aspects constitute a chance for revenge by Frankenstein's monster enacted on its own creator, a 'monstrous signifier', or a 'return of the repressed' as cited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. In fact, as already seen by Gilbert and Gubar's, and subsequently by Adrienne Rich's analysis, the (female) Gothic constitutes the occasion of a confrontation between the self and the monstrous other, in order to confirm to the self its instance of subject integrated in a social fabric, while to the Monster that of being relegated to a collateral opposition from the former one.

I have cited Adrienne Rich because it was Rich who identified, in a novel subsequent to *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), both the oppositional duplicity of the nature of the female character adhering to conservative and normative British canons, and the negative and animalised representation of the female character's counterpart, Bertha Mason, as opposed to the physical space of the Thornfield Estate. This dichotomic contrast provides a microcosmic representation of the white patriarchal Victorian society in which Jane Eyre is a governess, epitomised by Sir Edward Rochester, and within which Bertha Mason is represented as the renegade wife who has been relegated to the othered, invisible, anti-normative space of the attic.

The polarity between Jane and Bertha is reflective if joined to the discourse of the spaces of Thornfield because Jane, as a white, English woman, is juxtaposed with the exotic customs manifested by Bertha Mason, whose impetuous nature is classified as deranged and described as beastly by Brontë.²³⁸ This last element of Bertha Mason's otherness as a creole mad woman would be further highlighted by Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea*²³⁹, a

²³⁷ Aaron, Jane, "The Return of the Repressed: Reading Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*." *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, 1991, pp. 9-21.

²³⁸ Rich, Adrienne, "Jane Eyre: The temptations of a motherless woman." *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1978, 1966*, pp. 89-106.

²³⁹ Rhys, Jean, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, WW Norton & Company, 1992.

postcolonial 1969 response by Rhys to Brontë's novel, where in a first-person narration Bertha, still in possession of her surname Cosway, tells her version of the events at Thornfield Hall. Above all, however, there is another element through which we can also analyse Frankenstein's monster and *The Last Man's* Plague within the Gothic scenario. This is the attribution of Orientalism both to the Creature and to the Plague, as seen in the description of Evadne's character, who on her deathbed curses Raymond as the most representative character in the novel of a white Eurocentric masculinity, condemning him and all of humanity to the plague.

Moreover, it must be said that as much as the feminine abject embodied by Evadne as already discussed in the theoretical-methodological chapter (Lefanu), it is appropriate to re-read the monstrous as a category assimilable to the feminine. This is not only because, according to Steven Vine²⁴⁰, Jane Aaron²⁴¹, and Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar²⁴², the Plague constitutes the reaffirmation of the repressed and the monstrous female body first created and then destroyed by Victor Frankenstein in his laboratory, but also because this aspect is reiterated by Anne Hermann in her analysis of the monstrous in *Frankenstein* by fusing a grotesque perspective and a Bakhtinian and feminist approach.²⁴³

As we have seen, the Gothic as a genre takes on a different connotation starting from Mary Shelley and her *Frankenstein* (1818), contributing to cement the foundation of what will be later identified by Ellen Moers as 'Female Gothic'.²⁴⁴ This is a genre that, being the result of female authorship, also becomes the representative genre for a politics of resistance, innovation, and expression of the anxiety of the female universe during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It also sees in the figure of the Shelleyan monster a dual image of contestation of the symbolic order, in search of the meaning of human and non-

²⁴⁰ Vine, Steve, "Mary Shelley's Sublime Bodies: Frankenstein, Matilda, The Last Man." *English* 55.212 (2006), pp. 141-156.

²⁴¹ Aaron, Jane, "The Return of the Repressed: Reading Mary Shelley's The Last Man." *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, 1991, pp. 9-21.

²⁴² Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. "Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve." *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text, Contexts, Nineteenth-century Responses, Modern Criticism*, 1990, pp. 225-240.

²⁴³ Hermann, Anne, "The dialogic and difference: An." *An/Other* (1989).

²⁴⁴ Moers, Ellen, *Female gothic*. na, 1979.

human, and a simultaneous embodiment of the contradictions of Western middle-class identity. In this regard, it is useful to keep in mind the historical-political context in which the Gothic developed and especially in which Mary Shelley decided to write.

As anticipated by Jerrold E. Hogle in his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, the readership of the Gothic novel is predominantly the Western middle-class, referring to the fact that

Gothic fictions since Walpole have most often been aspiring but middling, or sometimes upper middle-class, white people caught between the attractions or terrors of a past once controlled by overweening aristocrats or priests (or figures with such aspirations) and forces of change that would reject such a past yet still remain held by aspects of it including desires for aristocratic or superhuman powers.²⁴⁵

As Hogle states, Shelley's *Frankenstein* itself denounces the double anxiety of a protagonist who, on the one hand, intends to transcend the bodily boundaries of life and death by creating a monstrous being, as well as to satisfy his preconscious dream of reuniting with his dead mother. This dream was in fact probably shared by Shelley herself, as seen through the creative act of writing a new Gothic novel announcing the proliferation of a new and monstrous progeny. On the other hand, it highlights the expression of middle-class scientific ambitions, combined with an attraction to alchemy and modern biochemistry, in order to contrast the rise of a monstrous urban working class on which the ambitious middle-class is exponentially dependent. This, explains Hogle, would also justify the tendency seen during the twentieth century to resort to psychoanalytic interpretations and neo-historicist and cultural studies born in order to investigate the correlations between class-based conflicts, ideological technology, and the urgency to exorcise the monstrous manifestations of the Gothic through the narrative act in different literary eras.

According to Leslie Fiedler, there is «a feeling of guilt and fear to move the actions of the Gothic, where guilt represents the guilt of the revolutionary haunted by the (paternal) past which he (the revolutionary) has been trying to destroy» while that which «possesses the gothic and motivates its tone is the fear that by destroying

²⁴⁵ Hogle, Jerrold E., "Introduction: Modernity and the Proliferation of the Gothic." *The Cambridge companion to the modern Gothic*. Cambridge University Press, 2014., pp. 3-19., p. 3

the old ego-ideals of church and state, the West has opened a way for the irruption of darkness: for insanity and the disintegration of the self.»²⁴⁶ Moreover, according to the interpretation provided by Jen-yi Hsu, and as emerged from Edmund Burke's 1790 pamphlet on the French Revolution, the monster may constitute a socio-political metaphor, in reference to the symbolism derived from Burke's reflections on the French Revolution. In this work, Burke highlights the fear towards the threat deriving from the fall of France's *Ancien Régime*, and how this could be reflected on English institutions and political dynamics. Burke, in fact, defends «the fixity of social relations and positions», asserting that whatever threatens these relations must be eliminated or repressed.

Mary Shelley's merit is to have destabilised, through the creation of the Gothic monster, such social relations, while refusing to confine the 'filthy' to the sphere of the 'regrettable', 'wicked', and 'abnormal', instead celebrating this monstrosity as the testimony of the fear that has been nurtured towards «the repressed, the embodiment of a pile of remains (be it female sexuality or the excessive threat of the proletariat) on which patriarchal, bourgeois society secures its rationality and autonomy.»²⁴⁷ This confirms the role of the monster presented in this paper: to collect all the elements rejected by the symbolic order and channel them into an exuberant and eccentric image that cannot be tamed. Nevertheless, this excessive corporeity is rejected and functional to keep alive the very system that repudiates it and to which it is at the same time indispensable. «This is the reason why», Hsu argues, that

throughout the critical history of *Frankenstein*, the Gothic monster has evoked multiple interpretations: it could be the proletariat mob, the projection of sexual perversity, women's creativity, and so forth. To put it in another way, the monster has not an essential quality in itself; its existence only relates to a boundary and, more particularly, represents the object jettisoned out of that boundary, its other side. This is what Julia Kristeva calls abjection.²⁴⁸

²⁴⁶ Fiedler, Leslie, "Charles Brockden Brown and the Invention of the American Gothic" in *Love and Death in the American Novel*. Rev. ed., Dell, New York, 1966. 126–61, p. 129

²⁴⁷ Hsu, Jen-yi, "Gothic Sublime, Negative Transcendence, and the Politics of Abjection: Woman Writer and her Monster in *Frankenstein*" *Taiwan Journal of English Literature* 1, 2003, pp. 1-16., p. 4

²⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

It should also be specified that the establishment of Gothic fiction in England developed hand in hand with the rediscovery of the philosophy of the Sublime during the eighteenth century, culminating in England with Edmund Burke's essay, the *Philosophical Enquiry on our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*,²⁴⁹ published in 1796. This essay relates to the Gothic novel's intention to oppose the Neoclassical ideals of balance and beauty that were in place during English Pre-Romanticism, allowing the irrational, the monstrous, and the fantastic to become prevalent categories. The characteristic of the classic Gothic genre is precisely that of moving between realism and the supernatural, between antique spaces pervaded by ghosts, spectres, monsters, and conventional reality in which the monstrous is intertwined with vile and corrupt human nature, as the novels of Ann Radcliffe and Horace Walpole demonstrate.

As Hogle points out, such oscillation between reality and the supernatural «can range across a continuum between what have come to be called 'terror Gothic' on the one hand and 'horror Gothic' on the other»²⁵⁰, as theorised by Ann Radcliffe herself in her posthumously published *On the Supernatural in Poetry*²⁵¹. Here, Radcliffe specifies how «Terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them».²⁵² Commenting on how neither Milton, nor Shakespeare, nor Burke would look to positive horror searches of sublime, though they all agreed that «terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between horror and terror, but in the uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?».²⁵³

In other words, if "terror Gothic" leaves the readers in a state of anguish towards the threats of life and suspension in relation to fears arising from the

²⁴⁹ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Oxford University Press, 1990

²⁵⁰ Hogle, Jerrold E., "Introduction: Modernity and the Proliferation of the Gothic." *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic*, p. 3 [Hogle's note: Here I gratefully parallel the attempt to distinguish the Gothic tale clearly from other kinds of ghost stories in Chris Baldick, ed., *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. xi-xxiii.]

²⁵¹ Radcliffe, Anne, "On the supernatural in poetry." *Gothic Horror: A Guide for Students and Readers*, 2007, pp. 60-69.

²⁵² Radcliffe, Anne, "On the Supernatural in Poetry". *New Monthly Magazine* 7 (1826).---. *The Mysteries of Udolpho*.", 1980, pp. 145-152

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

characters' past, horror Gothic confronts the characters with violence, physical and psychological dissolution, openly destroying the norms of everyday life through traumatic and shocking consequences. In this regard, Radcliffe's essay overcomes Burke's reflection on sublime terror, which classifies it as a feeling that induces reflection on the concepts of 'Infinity' and 'vastness', the characteristics of the "positive horror" identified by Radcliffe, and that Burke defines as

whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, [including the fear of death] that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.²⁵⁴

Further, "sublimation" is what would be considered unacceptable to consciousness, «so as to transfigure that deadly otherness in to the merest and most harmless figures».²⁵⁵

Here, therefore, lies the purpose of associating the monstrous corporeality to an idea of otherness, since by distancing it from the subject it is made acceptable in its otherness, and at the same time assimilable to the subject, yet functional to the latter to reaffirm its monadic integrity. The Shelleyan monstrous enters the scene as a subversive figure and as a starting point for this feminist study on embodied liminality, where Frankenstein's monster and the allegory of the Plague in *The Last Man* are mirror images of a destabilisation of the norm and the symbolic order legitimised by the discourse²⁵⁶.

The aim of this chapter, therefore, is to consider the representation of the monstrous in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* as paradigms and starting points from which to observe the evolution of the monstrous, the abject, and the grotesque, in relation to the contemporary authors I have selected to use as comparative case studies, dwelling in this chapter on the research of the

²⁵⁴ Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 36

²⁵⁵ Hogle, Jerrold E., "Introduction: Modernity and the Proliferation of the Gothic." In *The Cambridge companion to the modern Gothic*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 15

²⁵⁶ Brooks, Peter, "What Is a Monster? (According to Frankenstein)" in *Body Work. Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Harvard University Press, 1993.

grotesque discourse in relation to Shelley's work and her construction of the monster in *Frankenstein* and the plague in *The Last Man*. Furthermore, it will be necessary to focus on the aspects that relate Frankenstein's monster to the posthuman discourse and how, in turn, grotesque and posthuman theories can be in dialogue with the feminist critique that has emerged in relation to studies on Shelley's work. Another aspect it will be necessary to reflect on, as anticipated in the theoretical-methodological apparatus, will be the correspondence between identity, corporeality, and the physical spaces classified as inside and outside of the symbolic discourse, which also constitute the spaces of power as opposed to the spaces of subalternity, that is, the spaces of the monstrous anti-subject and the sublime.

This analysis will be carried out using a post-structuralist and transfeminist perspective.

2.2 *Frankenstein*: a metaphorical literarization of monstrosity

Using a Lacanian approach, which I intend here to accept as an interpretative methodology of Shelley's *Frankenstein* according to Peter Brooks, we can observe how Brooks himself emphasises the importance of the body as an instrument of conjunction between nature and culture. In the case of Frankenstein's monster, the bodily materiality of the Creature contradicts this dichotomic correlation, since the monster's body is not naturally generated but is rather the final result of Victor Frankenstein's effort due to his scientific and alchemical knowledge. The Creature therefore comes into being as a hybrid product generated by the encounter between nature and technoscience. As Brook explains,

In *Frankenstein*, however, the monster has an artificial body whose development runs counter to conventionally natural human modes of socialisation: its image is repulsive and it is only in language that an almost human identity is attained. The monster thus exceeds and undermines symbolic categories, showing how notions of nature, culture and humanity are effects of language and culture.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 103

For Brooks, then, the arbitrariness through which the symbolic order is conceived and through which bodies are classified is evident. The dialogue between Victor Frankenstein's subjectivity and the abjection related to the Creature is both the central pivot of Shelley's first novel and also the most relevant aspect of the critique of the subject through a queer and feminist perspective.

According to Mair Rigby, the expression "queer Gothic" aims to synthesise a critical approach to the Gothic in order to illustrate the potentialities of «experience[ing] certain anxieties, resistances and transgressive pleasures in relation to sexual norms» and at the same time to reinterpret 19th century Gothic «as illustrating the troubled development of a western, white, middle-class, heterosexual identity, which is still culturally privileged and dominant to this day»²⁵⁸. In fact, as already anticipated by Hogle, the Gothic novel leads to a «simultaneously fearful and attractive confrontation with the "thrown off" anomalies that are actually basic to the construction of a Western middle-class self.»²⁵⁹ Consequently, what represents the repressed from the subject is embodied by monstrosity, the dark forces and the supernatural terrors, which constantly bring the subject into a state of crisis and re-negotiation with the boundaries imposed by the subject itself. The Gothic thus represents, as argued by Rhona Berenstein, «a site of ideological contradiction and negotiation» where a diatomic process of «convention and transgression»²⁶⁰ is shown.

I claim that Brooks' rhetorical question, 'What is a monster?' in relation to *Frankenstein*, has to be considered the starting point for Shelley's idea, due to the fact that the novel is, indeed, a negotiation between alternative identities and a critique of human affection. «What, then, in unprincipled nature, is a monster?»

Brooks asks:

A monster is that outcome or product of curiosity or epistemophilia pushed to an extreme that results -- as in the story of Oedipus -- in confusion, blindness, and exile. A monster is that which cannot be placed in any of the taxonomic schemes devised by the human mind to understand and to order nature. It exceeds the very basis of

²⁵⁸ Rigby, Mair, *Monstrous desire: Frankenstein and the queer Gothic*. Cardiff University, United Kingdom, 2006, p.7

²⁵⁹ Hogle, Jerrold E., "Introduction: Modernity and the Proliferation of the Gothic." In *The Cambridge companion to the modern Gothic*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 8

²⁶⁰ Berenstein, Rhona Joella, "Attack of the leading ladies: The masks of gender, sexuality, and race in classic horror cinema.", 1993, pp. 4111-4111. PhD Degree, University of California, Los Angeles, p. 10

classification, language itself: it is an excess of signification, a strange byproduct or leftover of the process of making meaning. It is an imaginary being who comes to life in language and, once having done so, cannot be eliminated from language. Even if we want to claim that "monster," like some of the words used by Felix and Agatha -- "dearest," "unhappy" -- has no referent, it has a signified, a conceptual meaning, a place in our knowledge of ourselves. The novel insistently thematizes issues of language and rhetoric because the symbolic order of language appears to offer the Monster his only escape from the order of visual, specular, and imaginary relations, in which he is demonstrably the monster. The symbolic order compensates for a deficient nature: it promises escape from a condition of "to-be-looked-at-ness."²⁶¹

The symbolic order, therefore, is the only space within which the monster is allowed to be seen as a subject, rather than an objectified otherness to create distance from the subject. Furthermore, since the Gothic is, as already said, a genre which exorcises the anxiety of the Western middle-class subject, it is important, while analysing the genesis of the Creature and its connection with grotesqueness, to consider Shelley's life and her relationship with motherhood, for whom the act of birth is a both a birth trauma and a pregnancy trauma.

Anne Mellor rightly compares the three versions of *Frankenstein* revised by Mary Shelley to Wordsworth's prelude, as the preface from 1831 vividly recalls Wordsworth's notion of recollection in tranquillity according to Shelley, who remembers her youth at the times when she, prior to writing *Frankenstein*, used to wander in nature and felt inspired by landscapes.²⁶²

Furthermore, Shelley's romantic experience of intellectual inspiration lingers on monsters and supernatural visions of life after death and extraordinary births, contrasting with Wordsworth's aim of exalting common life and his intention of giving pleasure to the reader through the images evoked by the poets. Moreover, in the 1831 preface to *Frankenstein*, Shelley distances herself from the art of poetry. She reflects on her stay at Villa Diodati in 1816, when *Frankenstein* was conceived, and the common goal of the participants of writing a ghost story made the other guests - except for Mary, who was the only one to complete the story, together with Polidori's "The Vampyre" - back off writing their story, due to the «platitude of prose», which speedily relinquished the

²⁶¹ Brooks, Peter, "What Is a Monster? (According to Frankenstein)" in *Body Work. Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Harvard University Press, 1993, p. 218

²⁶² Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters*. Routledge, 2012., p. 39

uncongenial task»²⁶³. Shelley evokes her time in Scotland while walking in nature as an authorial and preparatory summoning of spirits from her own mind, looking for her own terror, into the spaces that she used to visit. «How I, then a young girl,» Shelley asks herself, «came to think of, and to dilate upon, so very hideous an idea?» anticipating the imaginary process that preceded the vacation at Villa Diodati. As Shelley declares, in fact:

I lived principally in the country as a girl, and passed a considerable time in Scotland. I made occasional visits to the more picturesque parts; but my habitual residence was on the blank and dreary northern shores of the Tay, near Dundee. Blank and dreary on retrospection I call them; they were not so to me then. They were the eyry of freedom, and the pleasant region where unheeded I could commune with the creatures of my fancy. I wrote then—but in a most common-place style. It was beneath the trees of the grounds belonging to our house, or on the bleak sides of the woodless mountains near, that my true compositions, the airy flights of my imagination, were born and fostered. I did not make myself the heroine of my tales. [...] Life appeared to me too common-place an affair as regarded myself. I could not figure to myself that romantic woes or wonderful events would ever be my lot; but I was not confined to my own identity, and I could people the hours with creations far more interesting to me at that age, than my own sensations.²⁶⁴

Therefore, after the 1831 preface in which Mary declares her intention to write a story faithful to the scientific principle of Galvanism, and recounting the inspiration for a fiction that, «although impossible as a physical fact» Mary Shelley does not accord the remotest degree of serious faith to such imagination»²⁶⁵, in 1831 Shelley expanded the overview on her artistic process. This was almost ten years after P. B. Shelley's death by drowning in 1822 in Lerici's harbor, and after many miscarriages she had suffered since the age of 16. It is important, I believe, to mention these events due to the influence and contribution that P. B. Shelley had on Mary's first draft, as Mellor shows, as he himself edited and purified the original manuscript.²⁶⁶ Mary, then an emerging writer, and the daughter of intellectuals William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, was working on her first literary work, and possibly accepted her husband's corrections without question, respecting his opinion and his deeper knowledge. In the 1831 preface, she recognises how

²⁶³ Shelley, Mary, "Introduction to *Frankenstein*, (1831)." *Frankenstein: Second Norton Critical Edition*, 1831, pp. 165-169.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁶ Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters*. Routledge, 2012., p. 60

he [P. B. Shelley] was for ever inciting me to obtain literary reputation, which ever on my own part I cared for them, though since I Have become and finally indifferent to it adding that P. B. Shelley «desired that I should write, not so much with the idea that I could produce anything worth of notice, but that he might himself judge how far I possessed the promise of better things hereafter.²⁶⁷

Therefore, as Mary testifies and as Moers, and Mellor after Moers, together with other feminist theorists,²⁶⁸ will recognise, there is a profound interconnection between the specter of the act of writing, Mary's life experience and trauma, which emerges from her doubts recollected in her journals and from the images her works evoke. The challenge of conceiving a ghost story to write during the stay at Villa Diodati at Byron's house in Switzerland in 1816 becomes an obsession that torments her, together with «that blank incapability of Invention which is the greatest mystery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to your anxious invocations.»²⁶⁹ The conversations between Byron and Shelley on philosophy and science, which Mary listens to with interest and devotion, include Dr. Darwin's experiments on Galvanism, pushing Mary's imagination to guide her, giving the images of her dreams «a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie».²⁷⁰ Therefore, what Mary dreams constitutes the *mise-en-abyme* of her yet unwritten novel:

I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—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 handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes.²⁷¹

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

²⁶⁸ Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar, *Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve*. Yale University Press, 2020.

²⁶⁹ Shelley, Mary, "Introduction to Frankenstein, (1831)." *Frankenstein: Second Norton Critical Edition*, 1831, pp. 165-169.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

This inspirational dream described by Mary Shelley, embodying the fruitful revelation of Mary's obsession for the moment of writing, suggests how the role of dreams was cathartic in her creative act as shown by two dreams she described, one in *Frankenstein* by Victor, and the other reported in a letter to Maria Gisborne in 1822²⁷², after Shelley's death. In *Frankenstein*, I am referring to the dream Victor has soon after creating the monster, while dreaming of Elizabeth/his mother. While embracing him, this figure becomes a livid corpse wrapped in a shroud crawling with worms indicating the rotting of the corpse.

The second dream, reported in the letter to Maria Gisborne, describes the circumstances of P.B. Shelley's death. Here, Mary recounts to Gisborne a dream, of her various miscarriages and dead children coming to visit her at Lerici's Villa, telling her the about decomposed state of their dead bodies. She also describes the recurring dream P. B. Shelley used to have prior to his death, when before travelling to the sea he dreamed of the villa flooded with seawater, and his alter-ego meeting him and asking him for how long he thought he would be happy.²⁷³ While I do not aim to adopt a biographical approach to the analysis of Mary Shelley's life and literary creation, I agree with Hsu's attention to the ignored «gap

²⁷² Allen, Graham. "Mary Shelley's letter to Maria Gisborne." *La Questione Romantica* 1.1, 2009, pp. 71-84.

²⁷³ Jones, Frederick L. "Mary Shelley to Maria Gisborne: New Letters, 1818-1822." *Studies in Philology* 52.1, 1955, pp. 39-74. Letter of Mary Shelley to Maria Gisborne, 15th August, 1822: "Now to return. As I said, Shelley was at first in perfect health, but having over-fatigued himself one day, and then the fright my illness gave him, caused a return of nervous sensations and visions as bad as in his worst times. I think it was the Saturday after my illness, while yet unable to walk, I was confined to my bed—in the middle of the night I was awoke by hearing him scream and come rushing into my room; I was sure that he was asleep, and tried to waken him by calling on him, but he continued to scream, which inspired me with such a panic that I jumped out of bed and ran across the hall to Mrs. Williams' room, where I fell through weakness, though I was so frightened that I got up again immediately. She let me in, and Williams went to Shelley, who had been wakened by my getting out of bed—he said that he had not been asleep, and that it was a vision that he saw that had frightened him. But as he declared that he had not screamed, it was certainly a dream, and no waking vision. What had frightened him was this. He dreamt that, lying as he did in bed, Edward and Jane came in to him; they were in the most horrible condition; their bodies lacerated, their bones starting through their skin, their faces pale yet stained with blood; they could hardly walk, but Edward was the weakest, and Jane was supporting him. Edward said, "Get up, Shelley, the sea is flooding the house, and it is all coming down." Shelley got up, he thought, and went to his window that looked on the terrace and the sea, and thought he saw the sea rushing in. Suddenly his vision changed, and he saw the figure of himself strangling me; that had made him rush into my room, yet, fearful of frightening me, he dared not approach the bed, when my jumping out awoke him, or, as he phrased it, caused his vision to vanish. All this was frightful enough, and talking it over the next morning, he told me that he had had many visions lately; he had seen the figure of himself, which met him as he walked on the terrace and said to him, "How long do you mean to be content?"

between abstract theories (such as deconstruction or postmodernism) and the disenfranchised (be it the colonial Other or women) corporeal realities»,²⁷⁴ without proposing an essentialist reading of Mary Shelley's work but while still recognising the deep interconnection between her experience with death and childbirth and her identity as a young woman writer while conceiving *Frankenstein*. The use of the expression «my hideous progeny» invited to «go forth and prosper» is itself the manifestation of her anxiety about the capacity of giving life to unhealthy children, as well as the anxiety of legitimising herself as a writer, as shown by Mellor's essay.

According to Mellor, in fact, Mary Shelley symbolically blended together the incipit and explicit of her book as well as the incipit and explicit of her life: Victor Frankenstein's death, the promised suicide of the monster, and his mother's death by postpartum fever can all be considered consequences of the same creation: the birth of Mary Godwin-the-author.²⁷⁵ Mellor also underlines the importance of Shelley's hideous progeny in anticipating and reinforcing the Gothic novel as a specifically female genre:

In creating her famous monster, Mary Shelley powerfully reinforced the tradition of the Gothic novel as a peculiarly female domain. *Frankenstein* surpasses its male-authored contenders, whether Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, Beckford's *Vathek*, Lewis's *The Monk*, Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer*, or Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, as our most culturally resonant and disturbing novel.²⁷⁶

Mellor, therefore, attributes to Shelley the power of innovating the Gothic genre within a patriarchal literary scenario and therefore to «trespass on the male domains.»²⁷⁷ As Cynthia Griffin Wolf states, female writers have had a fascination for Gothic fiction because its conventions have given them the chance to explore one of the most repressed experiences within the patriarchal culture female sexual desire. This is manifested in *Frankenstein* differently than it is in other female gothic novels, where the female body is conventionally shown

²⁷⁴ Hsu, Jen-yi, "Gothic Sublime, Negative Transcendence, and the Politics of Abjection: Woman Writer and her Monster in *Frankenstein*", *Taiwan Journal of English Literature*, 2003, p. 2

²⁷⁵ Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters*. Routledge, 2012., p. 55

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ivi, p. 56

symbolically through the image of the ruins of the castles – the metaphorical female body- penetrated by a male villain. In contrast, it is shown in *Frankenstein* through negated, silenced, dismembered and murdered sexual desire, both in the case of Elizabeth as well as that of the female creature. Mary Poovey underlines that the transgressive act of writing for women who wrote Gothic novels was an attempt to defy 18th century's morality; therefore, the act of writing itself could be read, if perpetrated by a woman, as an unnatural, perverse act, meant to provoke the hostility of the 18th century male reader. In her study of the Brontë sisters' literary case, Margaret Homans recognises the importance within the genre of female Gothic of the supernatural as «literarization of the metaphorical»²⁷⁸, as Mellor defines human reflection, whereas Homans comments that the metaphor of female writing and childbirth only becomes monstrous when subordinated to the law of the Father; in Shelley's case, elopement, pregnancy and marriage:

It is only when both childbirth and a woman's invention of stories are subordinated to the Law of the Father that they become monstrous; it is only when such overpowering and masculinist texts as Genesis, Paradise Lost, {119} and Alastor appropriate this Mary's body, her female power of embodiment, as vehicle for the transmission of their words, that monsters are born. When God appropriates maternal procreation in Genesis or Paradise Lost, a beautiful object is created; but through the reflex of Mary Shelley's critique, male circumvention of the maternal creates a monster. Her monster constitutes a criticism of such appropriation and circumvention, yet it is a criticism written in her own blood, carved in the very body of her own victimization, just as the demon carves words about death in the trees and rocks of the Arctic.²⁷⁹

This metaphorical usage of male childbirth in *Frankenstein* was first seen, as acknowledged, by Ellen Moers in her *Literary Women*. Moers recognises how childbirth was glamourised by male writers, such as Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*²⁸⁰ and how Shelley constituted an avant-gardist standpoint in narrating childbirth according to a female point of view, while demystifying it by means of the image of the monster, «in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread, and flight surrounding birth and its consequences.»²⁸¹ Furthermore,

²⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 57

²⁷⁹ Homans, Margaret, *Bearing Demons: Frankenstein's Circumvention of the Maternal*, Chapter 5 of *Bearing the Word: Language and the Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1986, pp. 100-19

²⁸⁰ Moers, Ellen, *Female gothic*. na, 1979.

²⁸¹ Ivi, p. 320

Mellor claims that one of the reasons why Shelley's novel reverberates so powerfully is because «it articulates, perhaps for the first time in Western literature, the most powerfully felt anxieties of pregnancy.» Mellor also describes the innovation of pregnancy as literary topic since Mary Shelley, explaining that

[t]he experience of pregnancy is one that male writers have by necessity avoided; and before Mary Shelley, female writers had considered the experiences of pregnancy and childbirth as improper, even taboo, subjects to be discussed before a male or mixed audience. Mary Shelley's focus on the birth-process illuminates for a male readership hitherto unpublished female anxieties, fears, and concerns about the birth-process and its consequences. At the same time, her story reassures a female audience that such fears are shared by other women.²⁸²

In other terms, as Mellor explains, Mary Shelley also had the credit of being a woman who experienced motherhood who was sharing the anxiety related with pregnancy with other female readers, questioning motherhood from a female perspective. This last aspect is something innovative, as no female author before had outspoken the fear of becoming mother. In *Frankenstein*, thus, there is an overlap between Mary Shelley's fears about childbirth and Victor Frankenstein's fears of inadequacy in being a father for his monstrous creature. This charges the birth-moment of the creature with a symbolic power of distancing this fear of rejecting one's own child, as long as Victor does not react to the newborn son's scream of pain, but rather he escapes from him:

Mary Shelley's dream thus generates that dimension of the novel's plot which has been much discussed by feminist critics, Victor Frankenstein's total failure at parenting. For roughly nine months, while “winter, spring, and summer, passed away,” he labours to give life to his child until, finally, on a dreary night in November, he observes its birth[.]²⁸³

Victor, hence, realises the grotesque complex of realisation while describing the creature and observing him being alive:

His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriences only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that

²⁸² Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters*. Routledge, 2012., p.41

²⁸³ *Ibid.*

seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.²⁸⁴

Therefore, as Mellor restates, Mary Shelley's dream of the student of medicine in his laboratory is the occasion for her to process the ideas of conception, birth, pregnancy, and motherhood, giving shape to these fears, but also processing the experience of being a child throughout the alienation of the creature, who lives abandonment and rejection, while looking for an identity. Gilbert and Gubar underline this parallelism in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, while retracing Mary's childhood as excluded step daughter from William Godwin's first marriage:

Mary Shelley, excluding herself from the household of the second Mrs. Godwin and studying family as well as literary history on her mother's grave, must, again, have found in her own experience an appropriate model for the plight of a monster who, as James Rieger notes, is especially characterized by "his unique knowledge of what it is like to be born free of history."²⁸⁵

This interpretation of Mary's life according to Anne Mellor would give the creature a specular dimension, becoming as such a reflection of Mary Shelley's experience as rejected and motherless daughter. In this way, in fact, there would be a clear identification between the monster and Mary in the act of observing DeLacey's family, which represents a model of the ideal family according to eighteenth century standards, from which the monster is, thus, excluded.

2.3 Abjection and the grotesque in *Frankenstein*

The idea of the sublime adopted by Mary Shelley reinscribes, according to Meena Alexander,²⁸⁶ the corporeality or materiality that Kantian sublimity imperiously repressed. This is because the female Romanticism represented by Mary Shelley's writing recognised, as Steve Vine explains while commenting Alexander, the need of legitimising a materiality which may exceed the constructions of mind and the Kantian idea of the sublime as a «demotion of the

²⁸⁴ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 39

²⁸⁵ Gilbert and Gubar [*Horror's Twin*, p. 238] are quoting a consideration made by James Rieger in his "Introduction" to *Frankenstein*, (the 1818 Text) (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1974), p. xxx.)

²⁸⁶ Alexander, Meena, *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley*. Macmillan, London, 1989.

supremacy of the mind»²⁸⁷ over the body, while distancing from considerations on the sublime and the beautiful as gendered categories which function as systems of ideological exclusion and subjection. Immanuel Kant's consideration, in fact, is radically opposed to the search for materiality aimed at by the female Romantic view of sublimity. He wrote that «the fair sex [sic] has just as much understanding as the male, but it is a beautiful understanding, whereas ours should be a deep understanding, and expression that signifies identity with the sublime».²⁸⁸

The female emphasis on materiality is, therefore, ought to be viewed as being in strong ideological opposition to the male intellectual ostracism and a vindication of the dichotomy of mind and body as inseparable objects of analysis. As Alexander clarifies, in fact, Mary Shelley's idea of sublimity started from conceiving the mind and the body as interconnected, since her

feminine awareness that mind could not be cleft from body [...] drove her to . . . a strategy of severe negativity . . . [Her] version of sublimity was based on fiery consumption, the body of nature sucking back the remains of a "wretched, engrossing self". . . drawing back into the womb of earth the ruined remnants of human imaginings'.²⁸⁹

Therefore, starting from this Shelleyan theorization, and as already anticipated in the theoretical methodological section, the feminist sublime can be read as a parody of the Kantian, male sublime. As Barbara Freeman states:

The feminine sublime is neither a rhetorical mode nor an aesthetic category but a domain of experience that resists categorization, in which the subject enters into relation with an otherness—social, aesthetic, political, ethical, erotic—that is excessive and unrepresentable.[2] The feminine sublime is not a discursive strategy, technique, or literary style the female writer invents, but rather a crisis in relation to language and representation that a certain subject undergoes.[3] As such it is the site both of women's affective experiences and their encounters with the gendered mechanisms of power from the mid-eighteenth century (when the theory of the sublime first came to prominence) to the present, for it responds specifically to the diverse cultural configurations of women's oppression, passion, and resistance.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷ Vine, Steve, "Mary Shelley's Sublime Bodies: Frankenstein, Matilda, The Last Man." *English* 55.212, 2006, pp. 141-156., p. 141

²⁸⁸ Ibid.

²⁸⁹ Alexander, Meena, *Women in Romanticism: Mary Wollstonecraft, Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Shelley*, Macmillan, London, 1989., p.191, In Vine, Steve. "Mary Shelley's Sublime Bodies: Frankenstein, Matilda, The Last Man." *English* 55.212, 2006, pp. 141-156., p. 141

²⁹⁰ Freeman, Barbara Claire, *The Feminine Sublime*. University of California Press, 1995., p. 3

Thus, based on this understanding, we have to read and consider in this irrepresentability of the female sublime how Shelley works, while reinscribing the trauma of corporeality and materiality represented by the Kantian philosophy, and protecting the feminine as a sublime excess of patriarchal representation». ²⁹¹ Consequently, the reflection on monstrosity once again underlines the challenge on the boundaries of human and non-human, as long as the monstrous and the grotesque disrupt the borders of the body. According to Zakiyah Hanafi's definition in her essay *The monster in the machine*,

a monster is whatever we are not, so as Monsters change form so do we, by implication. The human and the monster vie for space between two thresholds of transformation: the upper limits are good hood, the lower limit are bushed chialett's. We stake out the boundaries of our humanity by delineating the boundaries of the monstrous, whether by defining the criminal, the insane, or the merely inhumane. ²⁹²

Hanafi clearly underlines the arbitrariness of the dichotomy between what is monstrous and what is not. Thus, it is clear how when in Shelley's *Frankenstein* the Creature, in the report on his life-after-his-birth in Frankenstein's laboratory, tells Victor of the moment in which he reflected himself in the mirror on the water of the pond nearby DeLacey's house after being casted out, he recognises the non-human which distinguishes him, and is forced to face what he classifies as the grotesque within 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. ²⁹³

This is a cathartic moment for the creature, according to his tale, as he finally sees the non-human in himself, with this acknowledgement bringing him to an existential question, rhetorically asked to his own creator, Victor Frankenstein: «'Accursed creator! Why did you form a monster so hideous that even YOU

²⁹¹ Vine, Steve, "Mary Shelley's Sublime Bodies: Frankenstein, Matilda, The Last Man", p. 142

²⁹² Hanafi, Zakiya, *The monster in the machine*. Duke University Press, 2000, p. VIII

²⁹³ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 85

turned from me in disgust? God, in pity, made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid even from the very resemblance.»²⁹⁴

In other words, the Creature is asking Victor (and to an extent, God, who in this case represents Victor's alter ego) the reason why, if the divine creation of humanity was meant to generate a Creature in the Creator's image, the image of the Creature is so divergent from that of Man once this comparison occurs between the Creature and his Creator. This reflection, therefore, is also a consideration on the limits of language and materiality, as when the monster secretly learns from the DeLaceys' classes the science of words or letters and begins to master language. This brings the Creature to view language as a key to access civilisation, although he is still not entirely conscious of «the fatal effects of this miserable deformity»²⁹⁵.

Thus, when reading the masterworks constituting the basis of his education, such as Goethë's *Sorrows of Werther*, Plutarch's *Lives* and most of all Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the Creature still cultivates the illusion of the power of language as an ennobling tool for Man, evidencing the influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pamphlets on Mary Shelley's philosophical thought, with an illusion between the noble savage and the Creature who feels no difference between himself and other beings, and who experiences the pleasure of being among nature. However, the noble savage recognises, as Rousseau specifies in his *Social Contract*, the importance of morality and culture as instruments of access to civilisation.²⁹⁶ For the Creature, the DeLacey family represents a society recreated in a microcosm, and his ambitions to acquire language are motivated by his aim to make himself part of that social group. Before being rejected by Felix, and because of his education, the monster believes in the power of language as an instrument necessary for him to answer his questions: «My

²⁹⁴ Shelley, Mary, *The Complete Novels of Mary Shelley, Frankenstein, The Last Man, Valperga, The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck, Lodore & Falkner*, e-artnow, 2018, p. 272 [the citation is from the 1831 version, while the Pickering & Chatto edition is the 1818 version]

²⁹⁵ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 85

²⁹⁶ Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, New York, Methuen, 1988, pp. 70-88

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.»²⁹⁷ As John Lamb explains, the monster's inability to distinguish between different levels and types of discourse leads him to consider literary works such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* as true history, rather than works of fiction, in which he is impelled to search for his own identity, while identifying himself with Adam:

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.²⁹⁸

Therefore, the expulsion of the Creature/Adam from the DeLacey's hut/Eden, with the consequent awareness of the Creature of being a monstrous creation, leads him to accept his association no longer with Adam, but rather with the opposite of the image of God, Satan. Due to his ontological resignation to whom he is obliged by the Master's narrative, the monster must accept his condition. He is not Adam, he is Satan, and hence, as John B. Lamb argues, «he is forced to act out the role of Satan: «from that moment I declared everlasting war against the species, and, more than all, against him who had formed me, and sent me forth to this insupportable misery»²⁹⁹. Like Satan, then, he must adhere to the role that history has assigned him: to contrast God, fighting against the authority of the Creator: «Evil thenceforth became my good. Urged thus far, I had no choice but to adapt my nature to an element which I had willingly chosen. The completion of my demoniacal design became an insatiable passion.»³⁰⁰

According to Christian Bok, the passage from the Creature's identification with the Adamitic to an identification with the Satanic suggests how «an increase

²⁹⁷ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 96

²⁹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 97

²⁹⁹ Lamb, John B., "Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Milton's monstrous myth." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 47.3, 1992, pp. 303-319, p. 136

³⁰⁰ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 168

in linguistic competence corresponds to a proportional decrease in moralistic certitude»³⁰¹, allowing the Creature to recognise two fundamental aspects. Firstly, the condition of outsider that distinguishes him from other beings; and secondly, the power of language according to Satan, depicted by John Milton as a manipulator of eloquence and language. Diverging from the image of Man, an anthropocentric paradigm of Adamitic perfection, the monster is forced to recognise himself as abhorrent and grotesque (Adam: Man = Satan: Monster). While Edwards and Graulund establish that «grotesque bodies [...] act as a nexus of cultural anxieties about human bodies» and that «to possess a grotesquely monstrous body is to require regulation, restraint and containment»³⁰², David Castillo states that «the monster could be seen as material evidence or living proof of the inadequacy of inherited knowledge and social structures.»³⁰³

As a matter of fact, the monster consciously uses language while knowing that he is employing the language of the Creator. According to Fred Botting, in the discourse on monstrosity «Language becomes the site of struggle on, in and for which contests for authority are performed»³⁰⁴ and «language is itself glimpsed as a monster that resists and subverts the limits which any one's position tries to impose»³⁰⁵.

Therefore it is clear the comparison made by the postcolonialist philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak³⁰⁶ between the monster who, as non-human, recognises the power of language and the condition of alterity using the language of the master, could be matched to the character of Caliban from William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, whose feeling of exclusion is implied in his oath of vengeance against Prospero: «You taught me language, and all I can do with it is curse. Damn you for teaching me your language!»³⁰⁷. As a matter of fact, this

³⁰¹ Bök, Christian, "The Monstrosity of Representation: Frankenstein and Rousseau." *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 18.4, 1992, pp. 415-432.

³⁰² Edwards, Justin, and Rune Graulund. *Grotesque*. Routledge, 2013., p.45

³⁰³ Hiskes, Andries. "Grotesque Genius: The Aesthetics of Form and Affect in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein." *Subjects Barbarian, Monstrous, and Wild*. Brill Rodopi, 2017, pp. 165-179., p. 21

³⁰⁴ Botting, Fred, "Frankenstein and the Language of Monstrosity." *Reviewing Romanticism*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1992. pp. 51-59.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁶ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Three women's texts and a critique of imperialism." *Critical inquiry* 12.1, 1985, pp. 243-261.

³⁰⁷ Shakespeare, William, *The Tempest*, Act 1, scene 2, Webster's German Thesaurus Edition, Icon Classics, San Diego CA, 2005, p. 24

view of the 'Other' as directly opposed to that of the Master is an aspect which was expanded upon in Edward Said's postcolonial investigation on Orientalism.³⁰⁸ In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, then, the process of Othering, as part of the process of constructing the Self, does not only refer to cultural representations of primitive, aberrant alterities inferior to Western white people, but it also refers to a parallel level of 'the white master', here represented by Victor Frankenstein, and to the Creature as the representation of 'the Other'.

Botting also recognises the figure of the monster as an unstable figuration of difference which is classified as «dangerously necessary but unstable figure of difference»³⁰⁹ in order to subvert all security and all systems of meaning. Difference represents opposition but it also exceeds it. Therefore, the instability produced by monstrous otherness indicates the instability of human as a stable category, erasing the boundaries between me and the abject.

As a being who refuses to be caged within a concrete signification, the monster is the embodiment of the collapsing meaning evidenced by Julia Kristeva while shaping the definition of 'abjection'. As we have seen, in fact, Kristeva considers abjection as starting from «“the uncanny” as based on a more fundamental human impulse that also helps us to define the cultural, as well as psychological, impulses most basic to the Gothic»³¹⁰, arguing that the grotesque subjects embody contradictions and therefore produce 'abjection', literally meaning "throwing off" and "being thrown under" (from Latin: *ab-icecto*). The abject/grotesque is thus a process of defamiliarisation with those manifestations evoking the repressed and the primeval fear of "othered" figures representing the monstrous, which consequently acquire a negative, condemned, 'Satanic' and not 'Adamic' connotation, as part of a social and cultural process of distancing. As Hogle clarifies,

The process of abjection, then, is as thoroughly social and cultural as it is personal. It encourages middle-class people in the west, as we see in many of the lead characters in Gothic fictions, to deal with the tangled contradictions fundamental to their existence by throwing them off onto ghostly or monstrous counterparts that then

³⁰⁸ Said, Edward, *Orientalism: Western concepts of the Orient*, Pantheon, New York, 1978.

³⁰⁹ Botting, Fred, "Frankenstein and the Language of Monstrosity." *Reviewing Romanticism*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1992, p. 55

³¹⁰ Hogle, Jerrold E., "Introduction: Modernity and the Proliferation of the Gothic." In *The Cambridge companion to the modern Gothic*, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 7

seem “uncanny” in their unfamiliar familiarity while also conveying overtones of the archaic and the alien in their grotesque mixture of elements viewed as incompatible by established standards of normality.³¹¹

Abjection, for Hogle, is basic to the shaping of a Western middle-class self, and Kristeva theorises abjection as that which disturbs this self, its system, its identity, its order, and therefore is expunged from the symbolic order. Specifically, both in Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, which I will later analyse, the materiality of the body is an object of analysis. It is not a detail of secondary relevance that in *Frankenstein* the main case study of the narrative structure is the reactualisation of the "corpse". As we read in *Powers of Horror* by Kristeva,

The corpse (or cadaver: cadere, to fall), that which has irremediably come a cropper, is cesspool, and death; it upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not signify death. In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death.³¹²

Therefore, Kristeva explains how facing the corpse, as abject, would mean facing the absence of I, of meaning, of selfness, that death constitutes. The grotesqueness of the Creature generated by Frankenstein lays in its artificial birth and unnatural posthumous rebirth, as death and life are described by Kristeva as borders that resist in order to distinguish the human from the non-human (or posthuman, as the Creature is in this case considered). With death taking over the body, the dead body becomes "wastes", in Kristeva's words. Abjection, meaning the unnatural re-actualisation of life after death, has to be viewed as the main impetus for Victor Frankenstein's research and actions, as he describes it as «an employment, loathsome in itself, but which had taken an irresistible hold of my imagination.»³¹³ Victor Frankenstein's search for various body parts in cemeteries is, indeed, a rummage through the wastes of a landfill made of rotting

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of horror*. Vol. 98. University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 1982, p. 3

³¹³ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 38

corpses. Victor interrogates himself during his abject search of corpses:

Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil, as I dabbled among the unhallowed damps of the grave, or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay? [...] I collected bones from charnel — houses and disturbed, with profane fingers, the tremendous secrets of the human frame.³¹⁴

The horror generated by Victor Frankenstein is due to his bringing corpses and human wastes back into the symbolic order, after that the symbolic order had abjected them with death, as Kristeva explains. «If dung» Kristeva comments, «signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border?»³¹⁵

The fear of the monster is generated by the crisis of the subject in front of the negation of death which coincides with the birth of a new creature; not having control over the dead body, this body constitutes an autonomous self, and hence the danger of something which is "unclassifiable". In other words, the Creature's posthumanity would contradict the supremacy of human beings, paradigmatically represented by Victor Frankenstein and his ambition of domination over death. Kristeva tries to describe the feeling of the Subject that realises his dismay once being deprived of its status of Subject by death, which is the loss of identity:

Deprived of world, therefore, I fall in a faint. In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.³¹⁶

The infiltration of death into life is, according to Kristeva, the collapse of the symbolic order, and it also causes Victor Frankenstein to realise the monstrosity of his creation once the Creature is alive. The majestic potentiality of his fight

³¹⁴ Ivi, p. 37

³¹⁵ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of horror*, Vol. 98. University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 1982, pp. 3-4

³¹⁶ Ibid.

against death is erased once the Creature becomes a living being and the dead, assembled corpse rises from the abjection of death and returns to life, and therefore to subjectivity. The dead body can be controlled, the living dead cannot; therefore, Victor's experiment is monitored by him and does not represent the final product of his ideas. The "true horror" arrives for him once the Creature looks at Victor, becoming an individual and no more an inanimate object. In other terms, the Creature is de-objectified through life.

As Eleanor Salotto well synthesises, «the gaze of the creature represents the otherness involved in achieving a subject position».³¹⁷

In fact, while describing his early intellectual pursuits, Victor Frankenstein remarks that his interests are neither the structures of language, nor the code of governments: in other words none of the knowledges related with the symbolic order. His interests, rather, concern science, as shown by his passionate interest in Cornelius Agrippa's, Paracelsus', and Albertus Magnus' treatises. What is more, as a result of his mother's death, caused by postpartum issues³¹⁸, his research evolves into a search for the «physical secrets of the world» that suddenly turn into a forbidden hunt for knowledge as soon as his quest becomes a search for the lost maternal body. According to Hsu, in fact, «this search culminates in his desire of recovering the lost maternal body by himself becoming a "mother"»³¹⁹, thus usurping the maternal power³²⁰ and consequently generating a monster.

Kristeva's abjection and Bakhtinian grotesqueness act as simultaneous phenomena of categorisation, as the central element of investigation on the figurations of the abject and the grotesque is the relationship between meaning (in the symbolic order) and materiality, and how this meaning collapses once the body is reduced to a corpse status. Henceforth, enlivening the monster means, for Victor, to recognise his role as an architect of the evanescence of the borders

³¹⁷ Salotto, Eleanor, "" Frankenstein" and Dis (re) membered Identity." *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 24.3, 1994, pp. 190-211.

³¹⁸ A reference by Mary Shelley to her autobiographical experience, as her own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, died after giving birth to Mary in September 10th, 1797 at the age of 38.

³¹⁹ Hsu, Jen-yi, "Gothic Sublime, Negative Transcendence, and the Politics of Abjection: Woman Writer and her Monster in Frankenstein" *Taiwan Journal of English Literature* 1, 2003, pp. 1-16.

³²⁰ Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar, *Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstrous Eve*. Yale University Press, 2020.

between the human and the non-human, a master of destabilising the monadic integrity and unity of the Western bodily canon. This contributes to legitimate the horror of Victor at the sight of the monster:

I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.³²¹

Conversely, while for Kristeva's analysis the cadaveric condition means a loss of meaning and the 'utmost of abjection', in Bakhtin's grotesque idea of corporeality, death does not constitute necessarily a synonym to 'the end of identity'. Rather, the monstrous body contrasts with the strictly delimited, monadic, complete body and becomes an 'in-becoming' corporeal experience of the afterlife which takes advantage of its own unclassifiability due to its condition as a body "outside meaning" (i.e. Abject). As a grotesque, resuscitated body, the monster can evolve into a figure of resistance against normativity and the binarism of death and life. To this end, Bakhtin states that,

In the grotesque body, on the contrary, death brings nothing to an end, for it does not concern the ancestral body, which is renewed in the next generation.³²² The events of the grotesque sphere are always developed on the boundary dividing one body from the other and, as it were, at their points of intersection. One body offers its death, the other its birth, but they are merged in a two-bodied image.³²³

From a queer theoretical perspective, Judith Butler agrees, as seen, with Kristeva and Lacan on the point that language cannot be considered as being in opposition to materiality, or that materiality can be collapsed into an identity together with language³²⁴. Rather, according to Butler, there is a materiality associated with the

³²¹ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 39

³²² The new species whose creation Victor is afraid of, if he managed to create the female partner for the already existing male Monster.

³²³ Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaïlovich, and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world*. Vol. 341. Indiana University Press, 1984., p. 322

³²⁴ Butler, Judith, *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of sex*. Routledge, 1993, p. 68

body as a located social and political entity, as well as a materiality of language. Butler «examined the relation between the materiality of bodies and that of language as a morphological imaginary, with the body sustaining itself as a visual production only through submitting to language and to a marking by sexual difference.»³²⁵ Therefore, I argue that the grotesque has to be interpreted in relation to my discourse on the monstrous body in *Frankenstein* (and *The Last Man*, as we will see in the next section) on the base of the considerations made by the 1990s feminist critical theories that wanted to consider corporeality using a non-essentialist and transdisciplinary approach.

This approach adopts Elizabeth Grosz's view, according to whom «the body» must be interpreted as a «physical, lived relation» and the psyche as «a projection of the body's form».³²⁶ In her essay *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Grosz enumerates six criteria for a feminist corporeal politics:

avoiding mind/body dichotomies; avoiding the association of body with one sex or race such that they must bear the burden of corporeality; refusing singular or normative models of the body; rejecting any essentialist ontology of the body; including psychical representation of the subject's lived body; and lastly, problematizing binary pairs such as private/public, nature/culture, psychical/social, instinct/learning, genetic/environmentally determined.³²⁷

I believe that this last point, the problematisation of binary pairs, is fully satisfied by the Creature by Shelley, as his experience as monster does not end up with his body being patchworked in a laboratory, but his experience is rather shown in its integrity throughout his confrontation with the normative reality that will reject him, with the essence of his birth that overcomes the relationships between nature and culture. His hideous physical deformity is functional to the otherwise precarious solidity of the social environment in which he was conceived, his access to learning through the lessons of the DeLacey family is due to his need to belong to a group. He exists, therefore he challenges the constructed binary of

³²⁵ Ivi, p. 72

³²⁶ Grosz, Elizabeth A., *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1994, p. 27

³²⁷ McWilliam, Erica, "The Grotesque Body as a Feminist Aesthetic?." *Counterpoints* 168, 2003, pp. 213-221., p. 216

living corporeality and dead corpse. However, one of the aims of critical theory, which takes into account the materiality of the body and its recovery, consists also in contrasting the Oedipal image of desire shaped by Freudian psychoanalysis, in which desire was seen as a lack (barred or repressed), but rather considering desire through Deleuze's and Guattari's representation (1984), whereas desire is seen as «material presence», recovering the notions of sexuality and eroticism according to a feminist practice. Plus, recovering desire as feminist materiality also means

reconceiving the body as a location of human capability, either as a surface and social sexual inscription (Liz Grosz), or as a crossroads for desire enacting the consumerite dream of production and consumption (Pasi Falk), or even as a site of technological transmutation for new communicative games (Donna Haraway and Zoe Soufoulis).³²⁸

In her essay *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo argues and advocates for the role of the female grotesque as «a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure»³²⁹ that leads feminists who support the resignification of corporeality to consider the material body not as a static, closed, self-contained body, but rather as the grotesque body of carnival, which is «open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing.»³³⁰ The grotesque body, according to Russo, is considerable as such only in relation to a norm which is, then, exceeded. Recognising Foucault's consideration from *Discipline and Punish* that demonstrates the act of disciplinarian discourses of cataloguing, segmenting, measuring, and de-normalising bodies, Russo also recognises the risk involved in producing a social self and therefore how risk constitutes a resistance against the normalising process: unlike the social self which identifies and disassociates itself from its "mistakes" (monstrosity, for instance), «this "room for chance" emerges within the very constrained spaces of normalisation. It is not, in other words, that limitless, incommensurable, and transcendent space associated with the Kantian sublime.»³³¹

³²⁸ Ivi, p. 217

³²⁹ Russo, Mary J., *The female grotesque: Risk, excess, and modernity*. Taylor & Francis, 1995, p. 62

³³⁰ Ivi, p. 8

³³¹ Ivi, p. 12

In this sense, grotesque corporeality is both a risk to and an attack on hierarchies of power and social order, where the function of dialogism plays a major role. In *The Dialogic and Difference*, Anne Herrmann investigates Bakhtin's theorisation of dialogism and grotesqueness from a feminist perspective, while situating the female dialogic as a process of construction of the self which, although emerging from a reciprocal process, meaning a dialogue, distances itself from the familiar hierarchical model of construction of the self/subject in relation to an objectified "other than I". I considered that Shelley has suggested the possibility of a constitution of a non-hierarchical subjectivity, different, a specular and potential construction which remains unrealised within her first novel. The three main female presences in Shelley's novel remain mute, undeveloped, unrealised: Mrs. Saville, Elizabeth Lavenza-Frankenstein and the female monster. Mrs. Saville is the mute addressee of her brother Walton's letters, whose writings constitute the entire novel. She is the absent reader and she is, according to Craig, the opening left by Shelley which could potentially complete a dialogic circle. Craig projects Frankenstein's and his interlocutor Walton's mutual erotic interest which was researched into the unknown: here, as we see, the scientific discourse and the sexual discourse are interchangeable. As Michel Foucault shows in his *History of Sexuality*, «we must ask whether the scientia sexualis, under the guise of its decent positivism, has not functioned, at least to a certain extent, as an Ars erotica. In short, the formidable "pleasure of analysis" [Foucault, *History of Sexuality*] erotic desire permeates the act of speech, binding speaker and listener in a profoundly satisfying mutual attainment of pleasure.»³³² This occurs in two cases: in Victor's speech to Walton and later in the Creature's discourse to Victor, once he narrates his previous life at the Chamounix glacier, the arctic landscape is for both Victor and Walton, an unknown place outside of civilisation where both can negotiate the question of humanity and past humanity.

As Craig specifies,

³³² Siobhan Craig, "Monstrous Dialogues: Erotic Discourse and the Dialogic Constitution of the Subject in *Frankenstein*", in Hohne, Karen Ann, and Helen Wussow, eds. *A dialogue of voices: Feminist literary theory and Bakhtin*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994., p. 87

The female monster, destroyed violently by Victor before she is fully created, represents, I think, an unrealized and unexplored potential that underlies all of Frankenstein. Shelley may be positing a relationship that very much resembles Herrmann's conception of the female dialogic. The two monsters would both be female in a sense, the male monster having been feminized through his position in his relationship of alterity with regard to Victor. Both would be symbolically female, but, in their own dialogic relation, neither would be feminized because neither would take the role of other/object/woman. The unrealized potential that the female monster would carry within her is the overturning of the hierarchized model of self-constitution that is based on alterity and inequality.³³³

Therefore, the female body of the monster, created and immediately destroyed, is both the symbol of a possibility as well as the fear of an unpredictable evolution of a body that would exceed the human. According to Vine, the sublimity of the materiality of the female monstrous body is not able to be contained by patriarchy, which therefore objects to it. It is a traumatic possibility representing an alternative and interruptive history for the human being. In order to avoid this danger, Victor subsequently destroys her, while applying a control he would not be able to apply if not for the abusive action on the passivity of an inanimate female corpse, which once alive would symbolise life and creation to him.

As Mellor claims, in his fear of the potentiality of the female monster, Victor symbolically represents not only the male fear for a female sexuality which is endemic to gender construction, whereas the conscious female sexual experience threatens a male parenthood and lineage. Victor's fear is also the fear of the Man who is afraid of the female independence and desires who, as Rousseau's noble savage, might negate her adherence to the social contract, while affirming her own integrity and right to decide of her own existence, namely, the right of vindication and revolution:

What does Victor Frankenstein truly fear, that causes him to end his creation of a female? First, he is afraid of an independent female will, afraid that his female creature will have desires and opinions that cannot be controlled by his male creature. Like Rousseau's natural man, she might refuse to comply with a social contract made before her birth by another person. She might assert her own integrity and the revolutionary right to determine her own existence.³³⁴

Victor, thus, imagines a female being

³³³ Ivi, p. 93

³³⁴ Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters*. Routledge, 2012., p. 119

ten thousand times more malignant than her mate, and who would 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.³³⁵

Furthermore, Victor is afraid of her being sexually free, and defying sexist aesthetics that prefer a female idea of delicacy, grace, submission, passivity, and sexual complacency. In a nutshell, Elizabeth Lavenza, who perfectly matches this description. Therefore, Mellor explains, this image frightens Victor to the point of reaffirming his masculine power of control by mutilating and violating the female monster:

Even if they were to leave Europe, and inhabit the deserts of the new world, yet one of the first results of those sympathies for which the dæmon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror. Had I a right, for my own benefit, to inflict this curse upon everlasting generations? (...) I thought with a sensation of madness on my promise of creating another like to him, and, trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was engaged.³³⁶

Therefore, once the female monster is destroyed, Victor is convinced of having prevented the possibility of the posthuman danger from proliferating, although, as Craig suggests, Shelley delegates to another, silent, female character, the potential of spreading the monstrous progeny; this character is Mrs. Margaret Saville. Although, in fact, her role is relegated, during the whole novel, to that of the silent addressee of her brother's letters from the Arctic, Mrs. Saville's role of female reader could not only invoke the aim of the 1831 "hideous progeny" to procreate, but also to rectify the hierarchised male subjectivity against the othered, objectified monstrosity, resuscitating the female monster's potential of destruction of Frankenstein's anthropocentric prerogative.

³³⁵ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 128

³³⁶ lvi

2.4 The Plague as a feminist monster in *The Last Man*

The other novel by Mary Shelley which will be referred to here with regard to the theme of the representation of the categories of the monstrous, grotesque, and abject, and the management of its tightly-bound relationship with identity boundaries and spatial and political norms, is *The Last Man*, first published in 1826. Mary Shelley wrote it after an age of profound suffering, due to the deaths of her two children, William and Clara, and the tragic death of P.B. Shelley on July, 1822. As Mellor refers, «the novel enabled Mary Shelley to gain distance from and some control over her profound anger and loss».³³⁷ What is more, while she tried to put in her novel the resentment towards P.B. Shelley's political ideologies, Mellor defines Mary Shelley's writing of *The Last Man* as «an attempted exorcism and as social analysis and criticism».³³⁸ This is a dystopian post-apocalyptic work of futuristic setting, in which Shelley imagines a plague pandemic that gradually annihilates the human species until its last representative, the protagonist Lionel Verney, called to witness this extermination and to narrate the events that preceded it. As Young Ak-On mentions, Verney serves as the posthuman emblem of the dissolution that testifies to the boundaries of the ego and how the 'fixed identities' of the white and Eurocentric society protagonist of the novel find themselves powerless in the face of the impartial advance of the plague.

If placed in a socio-political scenario, the plague assumes the prevailing function of the feminine irrational and intangible sublime, feared by the male normative system, to which the feminist criticism of Barbara Freeman, Patricia Jaeger, and Julia Kristeva refers. Similarly, there is no shortage of autobiographical elements employed by Mary Shelley in an attempt to process her grief over the death of her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley, who drowned in the harbour of Lerici, in Liguria, in 1822, or her own attempt to evoke the convivial and intellectually stimulating dynamics of the triad composed of Mary Shelley, George Byron, and Percy Shelley, which several critics such as Hugh J. Luke

³³⁷ Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters*. Routledge, 2012., p. 144

³³⁸ Ibid.

and Morton Paley have wanted to use as a basis for their work. Luke and Paley, in fact, have been keen to revisit the characters of Lord Raymond (Byron), Adrian (P. Shelley), and Lionel Verney (M. Shelley as *The Last Man* of the title). Barbara Johnson further notes how, at the time she wrote the novel, Mary Shelley was not only processing Percy's death just two years earlier, but was also coming to terms with having lost four children and with Byron's death in Greece. Johnson further points out that what is represented in *The Last Man* is the universal vision of Romanticism «which characterized the work of the dominant male romantic figures, Percy Shelley and Byron.»³³⁹

It is possible to observe how the first section of the novel is marked by governmental tensions, in order to show the variegated range of political realities that Shelley positions in an oppositional key, and to describe the different currents of political thoughts anticipating the destructive power of the plague that will manifest itself from the first chapter of the second part of the novel. The Plague suddenly becomes, in fact, the common enemy whose resistance assumes prerogative over the political conflicts in place. In fact, in the first section of the work we observe the characters redistributed into two distinct factions. On one side there is the Eurocentric British subject (British, Eurocentric, Western, male); on the other hand, we see the “barbarian” enemy constituted by the Turks, whose Islamic faith and non-European geographical positioning make them, inevitably, the exotic and orientalist Other.

In his essay called *The Last Man: Anatomy of Failed Revolutions*, Lee Sterrenburg defines Mary Shelley's work as an 'anti-political novel', due to the fact that, despite the various political positions represented, such as Utopianism, Bonapartism, and revolutionary ideals, any kind of political project fails in the face of the demonic plague. Therefore, as we saw, both Sterrenburg and Vine describe the reading of *The Last Man* as a novel that «cancels out the utopian rationality of Godwin as surely as it cancels out the conservative organicism of

³³⁹ Vine, Steve, "Mary Shelley's Sublime Bodies: Frankenstein, Matilda, The Last Man." *English* 55.212, 2006, pp. 141-156.

Edmund Burke»³⁴⁰, thus being interpretable as a post-revolutionary and post-romantic work.

As it is immediately observable from the second part of the novel, plague and war assume complementary roles in Shelley's novel because of their inhuman and merciless devastation. It is Verney himself who highlights this juxtaposition between human warfare, driven by individual interests and pan-European ideologies, and the disease that befalls men indiscriminately, taking precedence over the human events narrated by Shelley up to that point. Observing the physical decay of a plague victim, Verney uses a rhetorical language that alludes to the double reading plague-war:

As I was thus occupied, chill horror congealed my blood, making my flesh quiver and my hair to stand on end. Half insantly I spoke to the dead. So the plague killed you, I muttered. How came this? Was the coming painful? You look as if the enemy had tortured, before he murdered you.³⁴¹

Therefore, united against pestilence, which here becomes Otherness *par excellence*, and putting aside internal and international conflicts, men declare themselves to be allied subjects in opposition to a common abject enemy: Death, that generates the collapse of meaning via the symbolic order that Julia Kristeva identifies in the theorisation of the abject.

Nevertheless, it should be specified how the gradual spread of the plague, which moves from the East and travels up to England, assumes in this image the idea of the gradual dismantling of civilization as we knew it. In this instance, England represents the last bulwark, as well as, from a white centrist perspective, the maximum expansion point, from East to West, in front of the disease's unstoppable advance. Identified as «the Enemy of the human race», the plague constitutes the anti-anthropocentric tool through which the socio-cultural barriers of the West. To this point, in fact, the West had been seen as in opposition to those of the East, are cancelled in the face of annihilation through death, and the violation is the elimination of spatial and temporal boundaries. Verney describes

³⁴⁰ Lee Sterrenburg, "The Last Man: Anatomy of Failed Revolutions." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33.3, 1978, pp. 324-347., 328-335 in Vine, Steve. "Mary Shelley's Sublime Bodies: Frankenstein, Matilda, The Last Man." *English* 55.212, 2006, pp. 141-156.

³⁴¹ Shelley, Mary, *The Last Man*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 4, ed. by Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 203

the slow spread of the disease and the chain of nations that gradually become overwhelmed by it:

This enemy to the human race had begun early in June to raise its serpent-head on the shores of the Nile; parts of Asia, not usually subject to this evil, were infected. It was in Constantinople; but as each year that city experienced a like visitation, small attention was paid to those accounts which declared more people to have died there already, than usually made up the accustomed prey of the whole of the hotter months. [...] In the sunny clime of Persia, in the crowded cities of China, amidst the aromatic groves of Cashmere, and along the southern shores of the Mediterranean, such scenes had place. Even in Greece the tale of the sun of darkness increased the fears and despair of the dying multitude. We, in our cloudy isle, were far removed from danger, and the only circumstance that brought these disasters at all home to us, was the daily arrival of vessels from the east, crowded with emigrants, mostly English; for the Moslems, though the fear of death was spread keenly among them, still clung together; that, if they were to die (and if they were, death would as readily meet them on the homeless sea, or in far England, as in Persia,) — if they were to die, their bones might rest in earth made sacred by the relics of true believers.³⁴²

The death of Lord Raymond, pivotal symbol of Eurocentric imperialism, shortly after his contact with Turkish civilisation, underlines the «self-sacrifice to the Byronic exposal of uniting the English with the Greeks, taking Constantinople, and subduing all Asia» in Raymond's idea of acting as a conqueror and warrior and through his colonising intent to bring civilisation, that is, the Western vision to the East, where according to the Western perspective barbarism predominates. The plague therefore comes, in this sense, to level the political and identity boundaries and horizons. As I will discuss shortly, it is Jane Aaron, after reading *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who reads in the plague an act of actualisation of the potential resistance hinted at by Frankenstein's monstrous feminine figure, that grotesque feminine who is not destined to come to life because of Victor Frankenstein's fears around the possibility that the human race in a universal sense could suffer the repercussions. The life/death binary, in fact, tends to reproduce various dichotomies, including nationalisms and territorialisms that will characterise the political subtext of the novel. However, the plague does nothing but "equalize people, striking down all the barriers, killing all and surrendering to no one"³⁴³.

³⁴² Ivi, p. 139

³⁴³ An, Young-Ok, "Read Your Fall": The Signs of Plague in "The Last Man." *Studies in Romanticism* 44.4, 2005, pp. 581-604.

Nevertheless, before diving into Jane Aaron's vision of the plague's role, which I consider central for my critical analysis, it is necessary to point out that, in spite of the vision expressed by Aaron the representative essentialism of the plague's devastating power must be considered, since the social limits, poverty, and marginalisation of individuals are exacerbated for those minorities. Such groups were already oppressed by their lived reality of hardship and precariousness, as witnessed by Lionel Verney describing the social dynamics put into place by the epidemic's expansion:

Poor and rich were now equal, or rather the poor were the superior, since they entered on such tasks with alacrity and experience; while ignorance, inaptitude, and habits of repose, rendered them fatiguing to the luxurious, galling to the proud, disgusting to all whose minds, bent on intellectual improvement, held it their dearest privilege to be exempt from attending to mere animal wants.³⁴⁴

Therefore, in a context where social boundaries become porous and the laws of the normative system cannot be considered as the prerogative in front of the crumbling of civilisation, and while the plague consumes and annihilates cities and nations, it is revolutionary to interpret it as a metaphor of the subordinate and repressed feminine monstrous. Further, in its acting beyond meaning, mind, and language, it reacts as a reappropriation of the corporeal material, devastating it by means of the body's putrefaction resulting from the disease, and undermining the power of language, that is, of discourse and the symbolic order that produces it. Language, indeed, representative of human subjectivity (on the basis of a masculine paradigm) and self-representational, fails to encapsulate the plague in its sublime devastating force that assimilates it to the feminine sublime as well as to the grotesque feminine theorised by Mary Russo. As Goldsmith explains, in *The Last Man* the Plague and the language of the novel become analogous. The disintegration of identity, in fact, together with the disintegration of territorial borders, together with the insistence of the characters on trying to decipher the symptoms of the disease – assimilated during the novel under the name of "Plague", since "Plague" is the generic term used to classify a deadly pandemic disease– are all aspects that together constitute the misreading and uncertainty

³⁴⁴ Shelley, Mary, *The Last Man*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 4, ed. by Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 240

of an implacable sublime that for this reason puts in crisis the classifying power of language.³⁴⁵

Plague and language become analogous and conflicting, just as the plague ultimately prevails over language while confirming its supremacy through its intangible, devastating essence, in the same way Kristeva's overflow of the abject escapes from language. It also questions the static, immutable idea of the white, Western, normative subject, here represented by the character of Raymond. His death in Constantinople, a capital and symbol of the Eastern world, and place of Orientalised Otherness, anticipates the reappropriation by Otherness itself of the spaces which had previously been inhabited by the normative dominant subject.

Thus, if Frankenstein's monster exists in order to create an oppositional and specular mirror³⁴⁶ for the subject who generates it, here the subject finds himself obliged instead to surrender to the supremacy of the devastation of meaning and symbolic order which was constituted by language, and which becomes the instrument of a de-humanising process, unclassifiable and activated by the monster's disease. Given these premises and taking into account the perspective theorised by Jane Aaron, the plague should not be considered only as an emblem of the feminist struggle against the schemes applied by patriarchy, but also as a devastating force ready to dismantle any form of power, social class, and form of welfare, indiscriminately.

It is, in fact, the realisation of Victor Frankenstein's fears in front of that 'hideous progeny' whose birth he prevented, and whose subsequent proliferation would prevail over the human race, and the reconfirmation therefore of the unassimilable oppositional force of the monstrous as 'other from the Self'. The impossibility of representing the sublime and feminist of Mary Shelley's Plague is justified by the fact that the novel «erases all present ideological projects and possibilities; and this means [...] that the text's political potential is articulated in

³⁴⁵ Goldsmith, Steven, "Of Gender, Plague and Apocalypse: Mary Shelley's "Last Man"." *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 4.1, 1990, p. 129.

³⁴⁶ Hohne, Karen Ann, and Helen Wussow, eds. *A dialogue of voices: Feminist literary theory and Bakhtin*. University of Minnesota Press, 1994.

the mode of the unrepresentable, the mode of the sublime»³⁴⁷, as described by Jean-Francois Lyotard, who further states that Shelley's sublime «presents an instance of wearing something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be.»³⁴⁸

The end of the human race constitutes the end of discourse and of language, where there is no longer space for stories to share, and where «the unrepresentable» is the only remaining thing.³⁴⁹ The Plague in *The Last Man* is, according to Vine,

a radical, universal democratiser; it respects no differences and no distinctions. It renders all the structures, demarcations and hierarchies of nations, races, classes, creeds, genders, political parties, political programmes and political discourses null and void. The Plague is an unstoppable revolutionary; it is a monstrous leveller.³⁵⁰

As Patricia Cove argues³⁵¹, the character of Lionel Verney, within the plague scenario and facing devastating death, still constitutes the last bastion of corporeality and normative human identity resisting decay. As trauma theorist Cathy Caruth argues, it is possible to observe a correlation between illness and the landscape that reflects the trauma of the plague in narrative memory. In this case, as Lionel's scene at the Drury Lane shows, the characters in Shelley's *The Last Man* incorporate the signs of the trauma of war and plague in their bodies, thus making them sites of distress and horror. The scene at the Drury Lane Theatre is, according to Cove, a *mise-en-abyme* of the entire novel that brings onstage, through the actor, the embodiment of suffering and horror. The theatrical setting takes on descriptive overtones that evoke the Burkian Sublime in which the actor is placed:

The cavern shape the stage assumed, the beetling rocks, the glare of the fire, the misty shades that crossed the scene at times, the music in harmony with all witch-

³⁴⁷ Vine, Steve, "Mary Shelley's Sublime Bodies: Frankenstein, Matilda, The Last Man." *English* 55.212, 2006, pp. 141-156, p. 152

³⁴⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *Le différend*. Vol. 46. University of Minnesota Press, 1988., in Vine, Steve. "Mary Shelley's Sublime Bodies: Frankenstein, Matilda, The Last Man." *English* 55.212, 2006, pp. 141-156, p. 152

³⁴⁹ *Ivi*, p.153

³⁵⁰ Vine, Steve, "Mary Shelley's Sublime Bodies: Frankenstein, Matilda, The Last Man." *English* 55.212, 2006, pp. 141-156, p. 154

³⁵¹ Cove, Patricia, "'The Earth's Deep Entrails': Gothic Landscapes and Grotesque Bodies in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*." *Gothic Studies* 15.2, 2013, pp. 19-36.

like fancies, permitted the imagination to revel, without fear of contradiction, or reproof from reason or the heart. The entrance of Macbeth did not destroy the illusion, for he was actuated by the same feelings that inspired us, and while the work of magic proceeded we sympathized in his wonder and his daring, and gave ourselves up with our whole souls to the influence of scenic delusion. I felt the beneficial result of such excitement, in a renewal of those pleasing flights of fancy to which I had long been a stranger. [...] He was an inferior actor, but truth now made him excellent; as he went on to announce to Macduff the slaughter of his family, he was afraid to speak, trembling from apprehension of a burst of grief from the audience, not from his fellow-mime. Each word was drawn out with difficulty; real anguish painted his features; his eyes were now lifted in sudden horror, now fixed in dread upon the ground.³⁵²

Similarly, horror and disease penetrate the characters' bodies in *The Last Man*, prostrating them and making them vulnerable in the face of disease and deadly contagion. As we have already seen with Mary Russo in her essay *The female grotesque*, contagion and death induce the erasure and porosity of the boundaries of Identity which are drawn by the politics that involve the characters, whereby «the embodied horror becomes an illustration of the grotesque body»³⁵³ which, as Russo states in *The Last Man*, becomes an illustration of the grotesque body.³⁵⁴ As Russo asserts, it is «the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change»³⁵⁵. The transmission of the disease from the body of the infected person to the body of Lionel Verney is a key scene in the novel because this transmission of the disease unites Lionel, who up to this moment has represented the subject, in his incorruptibility, and the already infected victim, up to that moment the embodiment of the abject, in the process of crossing the threshold of grotesqueness. What charges the romantic grotesque with terror, as already anticipated in the previous chapter, is the cancellation of the comic valence of the grotesque body which, in nineteenth-century Gothic imagery, is therefore charged with gravity and drama, unseen in the grotesque of Francois Rabelais presented by Bakhtin. As Cove explains,

[t]his is exactly the way in which Shelley's characters understand the corporeality of their horror; although the boundaries of the body are transgressed, the body also marks and enforces the limits of the isolated individual. Lionel's experience as the last man is the ultimate articulation of an isolating and destructive grotesque: «My

³⁵² Shelley, Mary, *The Last Man*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 4, ed. by Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 220

³⁵³ Cove, Patricia, "The Earth's Deep Entrails': Gothic Landscapes and Grotesque Bodies in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*." *Gothic Studies* 15.2, 2013, pp. 19-36, p. 30

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

³⁵⁵ Russo, Mary, *The female grotesque: risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge, 2012., p. 325

person, with its human powers and features, seem [sic] to me a monstrous excrescence of nature'.³⁵⁶

Lionel's description of the plague's symptoms on his own body is indicative of both this access to the otherness of the disease and the awareness of the body as a site of physical trauma:

It was quite dark; but, as I stepped within, a pernicious scent assailed my senses, producing sickening qualms, which made their way to my very heart, while I felt my leg clasped, and a groan repeated by the person that held me. I lowered my lamp, and saw a negro half clad, writhing under the agony of disease, while he held me with a convulsive grasp. With mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself, and fell on the sufferer; he wound his naked festering arms round me, his face was close to mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome, my head was bowed by aching nausea[.]³⁵⁷

In addition to the opposition of the white male to the Other implied by the description of the black plague-bearer, which revalidates the opinion expressed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* that «imaginative geography and history help the mind to intensify its own sense of itself by dramatising the distance and difference between what is close to it and what is far away»³⁵⁸, this embodiment of the Oriental Otherness and simultaneous supreme realisation of the female grotesque is incorporated into Shelley's novel by the character of Evadne. Evadne is a Greek princess who is in love with Lord Raymond, and later abandoned by him. Evadne's body becomes the field on which to apply the 'mutability of her identity', just as that same mutability is later transferred onto Perdita's body and then onto Lionel's body, when he realises that he is the last man left on Earth.

In the case of Evadne, the reader faces a character whose strength and elegance are exalted at the moment of her presentation, and this aspect is emphasised by Cove, who notes «the simultaneous fluidity and freezing power of the grotesque body» of the princess during her agony.³⁵⁹ Cove continues to

³⁵⁶ Cove, Patricia, "'The Earth's Deep Entrails': Gothic Landscapes and Grotesque Bodies in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*.", p. 30

³⁵⁷ Shelley, Mary, *The Last Man*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 4, ed. by Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 263

³⁵⁸ Said, Edward W., *Orientalism*, *The Georgia Review*, Spring 1977, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Spring 1977), pp. 162-206, p. 168

³⁵⁹ Cove, Patricia, "'The Earth's Deep Entrails': Gothic Landscapes and Grotesque Bodies in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*.", p. 30

discuss on how Evadne's transformation, as she passes from a condition of prestige to a state of misery, emerges from the descriptions of her physical appearance, as it is known when Raymond first meets her. He presents her as a divine prototype of the Hellenic beauty: «Her dark hair was braided and twined in thick knots like the head-dress of a Grecian statue; her garb was mean, but her attitude might have been selected as a model of grace.»³⁶⁰ Conversely, when Evadne's body is corrupted by the plague, her body evidences the physical signs of malady, and also Shelley's tendency to engender her body as in Evadne's first appearance, stating that «It was a female». In the second scene, her assigned gender identity is blurred due to the grotesqueness of her appearance generated by the disease that de-humanises her and deprives her of her stereotypical female grace:

Suddenly I heard a piercing shriek; a form seemed to rise from the earth; it flew swiftly towards me, sinking to the ground again as it drew near. All this passed so suddenly, that I with difficulty reined in my horse, so that it should not trample on the prostrate being. The dress of this person was that of a soldier, but the bared neck and arms, and the continued shrieks discovered a female thus disguised. [...] (see here the cross-dressing of Evadne and her gender fluidity) pain and fever from her wound had deranged her intellects [...] the while her dry, hot hand pressed mine, and her brow and lips burned with consuming fire. [...] her emaciated form hung over my arm, her sunken cheek rested on my breast; [...] stood on her brow as the paleness of death succeeded to the crimson of fever [...]; a few convulsive movements, and her muscles relaxed, the limbs fell, no more to be sustained, one deep sigh, and life was gone.³⁶¹

Furthermore, Evadne's final curse against Raymond can be read, on a wider, vindicating scale of a sort of representation of the female plague cursing the male race not only as the final act of alterity against the patriarchy, here symbolised by Raymond on one hand and by Evadne on the other. It can also be interpreted, as Grammatikos shows, as Evadne's final, desperate act of dissent against the British man's treatment of the Greeks for his own personal gain. Shelley demonstrates that her problematic characterisation of Evadne represents a

³⁶⁰ Shelley, Mary, *The Last Man*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 4, ed. by Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 87

³⁶¹ Ivi, p.144

warning to readers about the dangers of Britain's cultural authoritarianism, rather than her personal unease with Greeks.³⁶²

As Jessica Mercado notes, Evadne's curse against her former lover Lord Raymond before her death acquires a pan-human scale, as she seems to embody not only the role of the Oriental Other, but also

the agent of plague and death; a transsexual agent, crossing gender lines and those of domestic life; a Faustian dealer, selling her life in order to bring death; a prostitute, who willingly sells her body [to death] in exchange for revenge, and the 'true' transmitter of the plague, a malevolent Eastern force that overtakes the mainly dominant, powerful West. It is this Eastern princess who marks plague and death as her servitors (in a reductive capacity: Evadne is a combination of Eve evade = she becomes a symbol of temptation, slippery significance, but most importantly, of latent destruction).³⁶³

From this perspective, we may also figure out the image of sick, dying Evadne as the accomplishment of Victor Frankenstein's fears: the debacle of the human race. Furthermore, as I anticipated, this debacle is extended to both Perdita and Lionel in two striking moments in which the mirror is a central instrument necessary to let the characters be conscious of their porous identity before them, as they become fragmented and splitted subjects Vs. objects in their minds. Perdita's self-reflection in the mirror, instead of allowing her to recognise herself, splits her perception of herself from the reality of her body's decay:

She stood before a large mirror — she gazed on her reflected image; her light and graceful dress, the jewels that studded her hair, and encircled her beauteous arms and neck, her small feet shod in satin, her profuse and glossy tresses, all were to her clouded brow and woe-begone countenance like a gorgeous frame to a dark tempest-pourtraying picture. [...] Farewell, Perdita! farewell, poor girl! never again will you see yourself thus; [...] I live on a barren desert, which, wide and interminable, brings forth neither fruit or flower; in the midst is a solitary rock, to which thou, Perdita, art chained, and thou seest the dreary level stretch far away."³⁶⁴

Similarly, apart from the grotesque horror of Perdita's self-objectification of her body, the fragmentation of identity due to the deadly pandemic is evident in

³⁶² Grammatikos, Alexander, *The Emerging Modern Greek Nation and British Romantic Literature*. Diss. Carleton University, 2017, p. 181

³⁶³ Mercado, Jessica, "It's the End of the World as We Know it, and I Feel Fine": Historical Antecedents of the Plague in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, *New Directions in Ecocriticism*, Fall 2010, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

³⁶⁴ Shelley, Mary, *The Last Man*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 4, ed. by Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 106

Lionel, the last witness of the plague and, consequently, of the human race's extinction. While looking at himself in a mirror, he no longer recognises himself as a subject, describing instead himself as a savage:

I started — I looked again with renewed wonder. What wild-looking, unkempt, half-naked savage was that before me? The surprise was momentary. I perceived that it was I myself whom I beheld in a large mirror at the end of the hall. No wonder that the lover of the princely Idris should fail to recognize himself in the miserable object there portrayed. My tattered dress was that in which I had crawled half alive from the tempestuous sea. My long and tangled hair hung in elf locks on my brow — my dark eyes, now hollow and wild, gleamed from under them — my cheeks were discoloured by the jaundice, which (the effect of misery and neglect) suffused my skin, and were half hid by a beard of many days' growth.³⁶⁵

Bodies, therefore, become visible proof of the power enacted by the Plague in her anti-humanist war, which considers not being safe from her battle against the symbolic order.³⁶⁶ Lionel, as Aaron comments, is the only one left behind to testify to the tale of desolation. He also recognises, in the end, of the male role in constructing a universalist, humanist vision of the world and society:

Farewell to the giant powers of man — to knowledge that could pilot the deep-drawing bark through the opposing waters of shoreless ocean — to science that directed the silken balloon through the pathless air — to the power that could put a barrier to mighty waters, and set in motion wheels, and beams, and vast machinery, that could divide rocks of granite or marble, and make the mountains plain! [...] Thou, England, wert the triumph of man! Small favour was shewn thee by thy Creator, thou Isle of the North; a ragged canvas naturally, painted by man with alien colours; but the hues he gave are faded, never more to be renewed. So we must leave thee, thou marvel of the world; we must bid farewell to thy clouds, and cold, and scarcity for ever! Thy manly hearts are still; thy tale of power and liberty at its close! Bereft of man, O little isle! the ocean waves will buffet thee, and the raven flap his wings over thee; thy soil will be birth-place of weeds, thy sky will canopy barrenness. It was not for the rose of Persia thou wert famous, nor the banana of the east; not for the spicy gales of India, nor the sugar groves of America; not for thy vines nor thy double harvests, nor for thy vernal airs, nor solstitial sun — but for thy children, their unwearied industry and lofty aspiration. They are gone, and thou goest with them the oft trodden path that leads to oblivion.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 352

³⁶⁶ In her recent article *Mary Shelley and the Anthropocene: An Eco-feminist Reading of The Last Man*, Serena Baiesi explores the theme of gender fluidity in *The Last Man* as a consequence of the interaction of the human with the non-human, which destabilises the consolidated status of the Anthropocene. See Baiesi, Serena, "Mary Shelley and the Anthropocene: An Eco-feminist Reading of The Last Man." *Textus*, 34.3, 2021, pp. 49-67

³⁶⁷ Shelley, Mary, *The Last Man*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 4, ed. by Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 252

Apart from this anthropocentric final consideration by Verney on the functionality of the world and its non-human living beings according to Man's view and Man's representation, what is fundamental to irrevocably shutter Lionel's romantic soliloquy is the inexorable, devastating power of a female Plague. It is often referred to as «She», «invincible monster», «queen of the world», «mighty leveller», or associated with the image of the serpent-head, representing the female power of seduction and finality.³⁶⁸ She is, again, the ultimate vengeance of a feminist reappropriation of the earth, which has finally been released from her repressed condition. «Of course», Aaron states, «the earth will keep her place amongst the planets when the Last Man is gone.»³⁶⁹

Differently from the novel's female characters, who are trapped in a patriarchal and subaltern representative scheme of submissiveness and acquiescence, as well as the female characters from *Frankenstein* and *Matilda*, «underneath the surface acquiescence of texts such as Mary Shelley's we may read the signs of a return of the repressed, cataclysmically freeing itself from its chains.»³⁷⁰

2.5 Liminality in *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*: from the Arctic to London

Both the reflection on *Frankenstein's* sublime and on wild and hostile spaces as places of negation of the self through confrontation with otherness, as well as the anti-political element that Steve Vine recognises in *The Last Man*, lead to a reflection on the relationship between otherness and its places in relation to the place of the subject and to its settlement in the normative spaces of the symbolic order. The arrival, in the second volume of *The Last Man*, of the Plague in Athens, can only signify the loss of meaning of political oppositions as well as the symbolic end of Western society and thought, as Athens, the capital of Greece, represented the place of origin of such culture and thought. As recognised by Lee Sterrensburg,

³⁶⁸ For a more detailed description of the Gothic and late-19th century representation of woman as *femme fatale*, I consulted Mario, Praz. *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milano, 2008.

³⁶⁹ Aaron, Jane. "The Return of the Repressed: Reading Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*." *Feminist Criticism: Theory and Practice*, 1991, pp. 9-21., p.19

³⁷⁰ Ivi, p. 20

The demonic plague in *The Last Man* cancels out the utopian rationality of Godwin as surely as it cancels out the conservative organicism of Edmund Burke. The end-of-the-world melodrama represents a departure from the assumptions and the organizing metaphors shared alike by the republican and the conservative polemicists during the decade of the French Revolution.³⁷¹

Furthermore, as Sterrenburg clarifies, the difference between the apocalyptic thought of Mary Shelley and that of her predecessors, such as Edmund Burke, or Mary Wollstonecraft, mother of Mary Shelley, or William Godwin, Shelley's father, is that, while they «usually adhere to a faith in the survival or even the gradual improvement of the human lot», and although illness guarantees a metaphor for the Revolution that interferes with social organization, «Mary Shelley retains the metaphor of illness, but transforms it into an absolute that effaces all human endeavor».³⁷² Susan Sontag confirms Aaron's, Vine's, and Gilbert & Gubar's image of the Plague as a metaphor of Revolution, as in Shelley's case, and a feminist revolution, suggesting that «with the French Revolution [n.b. *The Last Man* was published in 1826, soon after the end of the French Ancien Régime and the Napoleonic Age] disease metaphors in the modern sense came into their own».³⁷³

The two works by Shelley considered here fit within the discourse on normative and anti-normative spaces in an either positive or contingent manner. In *Frankenstein* we witness a continuous negotiation between the subject and the abject in multiple places and at multiple times [(1) the Arctic poles; (2) the laboratory; (3) the DeLacey's cabin in the woods; (4) the Chamounix glacier. In order to cyclically connect with the Arctic space where both subject, Victor, and abject, the Creature, reject the normative schemes embracing the unknown of the polar cold, and Victor certain death), in the second literary case of *The Last Man*, such a negotiation is denied and the irreconcilability of the monstrous with the construction of and the political and aggregative resistance of the subject to which the Plague-Monster is opposed is considered in order to deform the connotations of that subject who represents his exact counterpart. This is seen

³⁷¹ Sterrenburg, Lee, "The Last Man: Anatomy of Failed Revolutions." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33.3, 1978, pp. 324-347., p. 335

³⁷² Ivi, p. 336

³⁷³ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1978

in the case of Evadne, Perdita, and Raymond, who accepts his posthuman status while looking in the mirror and acknowledging the decline of the human race. Otherness, therefore, in the first case coexists with and within the “normed” spaces, while infiltrating them in the second case. This allows otherness to overflow into subjectivity, into the symbolic order which has now become functional, and into the normative corporeality that even prior to the arrival of the deadly pandemic opposed itself, in its Eurocentric vision of cultural and aesthetic political models to be spread, the cultural and aesthetic political models proposed by the East, here represented by Constantinople and by Muslim civilization. This transformation of spaces, the West on one side and the East on the other, is evident not only in the observation of bodies bending to the deformations and mutations resulting from the disease, but also by how the very spaces inhabited by normative subjectivities are, in the aftermath of the spread of the Plague, overrun by monstrosity, metamorphosis and the grotesque.

We see Lionel and Adrian moving through the streets of London on the night of November 20th, in a city pervaded by a ghostly atmosphere that denounces the signs of the demolition of every pre-established political organism:

On the twentieth of November, Adrian and I rode for the last time through the streets of London. They were grass-grown and desert. The open doors of the empty mansions creaked upon their hinges; rank herbage, and deforming dirt, had swiftly accumulated on the steps of the houses; the voiceless steeples of the churches pierced the smokeless air; the churches were open, but no prayer was offered at the altars; mildew and damp had already defaced their ornaments; birds, and tame animals, now homeless, had built nests, and made their lairs in consecrated spots. We passed St. Paul's. London, which had extended so far in suburbs in all direction, had been somewhat deserted in the midst, and much of what had in former days obscured this vast building was removed.³⁷⁴

The space of otherness has filtered into London, as we can see, where London, representation of progress and civilisation, has brought not only plague into its very heart, but also caused a loss of the boundaries between both West vs. East and between normative vs. non-normative corporeality. This is shown not only through the scene of Evadne's death, who is presented as sick and gender-bending («The dress of this person was that of a soldier, but the bared neck and arms, and the continued shrieks discovered a female thus disguised»), but also

³⁷⁴ Shelley, Mary, *The Last Man*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 4, ed. by Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 260

by the encounter in Hyde Park between Lionel and Adrian and charity girl singing Who inhabits on deserted house and who is «dancing, walking, and singing (...) followed by a large Newfoundland dog» and who is described as being dressed grotesquely, dressed grotesquely, in glittering robes and shawls fit for a woman; she appeared about ten years of age.»³⁷⁵ Therefore, the little girl not only represents an Orientalised macabre dance into the deserted London scenario, but also shows how, within the epidemic scenario, characters perform and embody the collapse of social, cultural and identity boundaries throughout their bodies, which become then transgressive and liminal in their physical incongruity.

As we can see from this post-apocalyptic description of London, nature (grass, birds, animals) is reclaiming its dominion over various spaces. Once populated by mankind, vegetation and beasts seem to have invaded London's streets and replaced people. As Kaitlin Mondello shows, Shelley's novel «undoes the Judeo-Christian concept of human dominion over nature», as nature and plague become interchangeable terms. Furthermore, as previously shown by Shelley in her play *Midas*, written in 1820, to which Percy Shelley contributed by writing the accompanying 'Hymn to Pan', there is a tendency to represent both Pan and his symbol, the goat, as synonyms of paganism. As Mondello shows, in the novel the Plague becomes a synonym of nature just as much as Percy Shelley defined nature as "universal Pan" in his hymn as an all-encompassing totality. In fact, in the novel's final volume, Mary Shelley quotes a translation of Hesiod with a quote from the Psalms, where human vulnerability to face an Orphic Pan-like nature is shown, which aims to reverse the hierarchy of human anthropocentric tendency to a divine exaltation of human actions and also the Judeo-Christian concept of human dominion over nature.³⁷⁶ Lionel converts himself into the posthuman subject while rejecting the posthuman anti-anthropocentric society he is encountering after the catastrophe of the plague. He resists bending his knee to nature even though the whole of humankind has been extinguished and he remains the only survivor. In the end, his states that

³⁷⁵ Ivi, p. 261

³⁷⁶ Mondello, Kaitlin, "The 'grim Unreality': Mary Shelley's Extinction Narrative in *The Last Man*." *Essays in Romanticism* 24.2, 2017, pp. 163-78.

No, no, I will not live among the wild scenes of nature, the enemy of all that lives. I will seek the towns — Rome, the capital of the world, the crown of man's achievements. Among its storied streets, hallowed ruins, and stupendous remains of human exertion, I shall not, as here, find every thing forgetful of man; trampling on his memory, defacing his works, proclaiming from hill to hill, and vale to vale — by the torrents freed from the boundaries which he imposed — by the vegetation liberated from the laws which he enforced — by his habitation abandoned to mildew and weeds, that his power is lost, his race annihilated for ever.³⁷⁷

Therefore, within a politics of spaces of resistance and counting narration, which is interrelated with a politics of the bodies, we may assist in *The Last Man* at the collapse of identity boundaries and spaces. The negotiation of identity generated by liminality, a consequence of the plague, the true means for social and corporeal change in Shelley's novel, proves how the anti-structure of the ideal space reserved for otherness has penetrated into the normative space. Lionel and Adrian who walk through the streets of London like visitors to the inferno, quite like two Romantic versions of Dante and Virgil, constitute the last traces of the white Eurocentric normativity which has been pledged by the infection, whereas the dancing, charity girl represents the counter-embodiment of the monstrosity and grotesqueness generated by the erasure of boundaries.

In *Frankenstein*, instead, the relationship between the corporeal liminality of the monster, of human and posthuman, and of the spaces of anti-normativity is constantly renegotiated by the subjectivity of the characters and the Creature's abjection. These heterotopian scenarios, whose atmospheric realism echoes the sublime with which the novel's scenes are charged, do not all represent places which are separated, temporarily and spatially, from the rest of the world. Beyond this, they also work to challenge the hierarchical distance between identities. In *Frankenstein*, liminality is a central element which crosses the novel's storyline and challenges the topics of death and life, as well as the boundary between unnatural and supernatural, cultural and biological. The liminality of Victor Frankenstein's scientific aims is evident to Victor himself as he manipulates the corpses taken from the cemetery, pre-enjoying the posthuman scheme that is presented to him:

³⁷⁷ Shelley, Mary, *The Last Man*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, Vol. 4, ed. by Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 356

No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life 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. (...) I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption.³⁷⁸

As I have already anticipated, the Creature's liminality is also related to the sublime in the gothic atmosphere that permeates the novel. In the same way, Victor Frankenstein's liminality emerges during his mirror confrontation with the Creature and, to an extent, with the idea of monstrosity. At the same time, the Creature's liminality can be evidenced by the recurring motif of the window, from which the Creature observes human life, while observing the DeLaceys in the cabin, the creation of his female mate in Victor's laboratory, or just after killing Elizabeth in her bedroom. There are, I believe, four main heterotopic spaces in which identity and the relationship with corporeality is negotiated in *Frankenstein*: 1) Victor's laboratory, where he isolates himself from society in order to produce his own creation; 2) the northern poles and the Arctic, where Victor and Walton first meet and later confront the Creature; 3) the Chamounix glacier, where the Creature and Victor confront each other, and where the Creature is given the chance to speak; and 4) the DeLacey's cabin in the woods.

2.5.1 Victor Frankenstein's laboratory

The geographic position of the laboratory, generally situated underground, together with its functions of space dedicated to research and science, generates a paradox, as that very space is used by Victor as an area deprived of human control. This is therefore a space where Victor can conduct his experimentation away from the judgement of upper society, in a space where Victor feels bound to and at the same time sickly attracted by due to his experiment, as demonstrated by his statement: «Sometimes I could not prevail on myself to enter my laboratory for several days, and at other times I toiled day and night in order

³⁷⁸ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 37

to complete my work. It was, indeed, a filthy process in which I was engaged.»³⁷⁹ The laboratory is, thus, a space where Victor carries out his experiment as well as where he reflects on the nature of his work, the excess and the risks he is taking with his enterprise, while negotiating his own identity: «my mind was intently fixed on the consummation of my labour, and my eyes were shut to the horror of my proceedings.»³⁸⁰ The laboratory is also the space where he denies the female monster the chance of an existence, dismembering her after having created her, choosing then on which side of the line to stay: the monster's posthuman side or the human, anthropocentric side.

2.5.2 The DeLacey's cabin

The DeLacey's cabin, in stark contrast to the laboratory, represents for the Creature a possibility of access to society, before he is conscious of being considered a freak according to normative society. Plus, the DeLaceys have suffered through the process of being marginalised, following Old DeLacey's loss of his fortune, which has relegated the family, as the Creature recounts, to a condition of misery and sadness during an initial phase of their staying in the cabin. Nevertheless, as Mellor specifies, the DeLaceys represent Shelley's ideal image of the nuclear family from the 18th and 19th century, perfectly connected to nature and cultivating a Rousseauian approach to human life and society, as emerges from Felix and Safie's lessons, which are useful for the monster's education as well.³⁸¹ While the home meets the heterotopian definition of space of resistance where marginalised groups such as the DeLacey family and the monster, are able to reconfigure their condition of isolation in order to transform it into a chance for the development of solidarity functions and alliances, the cottage is also a space where a communal ecology and utopian domesticity are experienced. As Colin Carman notes in his essay *The radical ecology of The Shelleys. Eros and environment*³⁸², the ideal family represented by the DeLaceys is immediately presented by the Creature as an opposite space from

³⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 127

³⁸⁰ Ibid.

³⁸¹ Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: her life, her fiction, her monsters*. Routledge, 2012., p. 38

³⁸² Carman, Colin, *The Radical Ecology of the Shelleys: Eros and Environment*. Routledge, 2018.

Frankenstein's laboratory: while the former, in fact, is described as «an asylum from the snow and rain» for the Creature who escapes from the scared villagers who had previously attacked him, the laboratory is remembered by him as «the workshop of filthy creation.» The contribution of the Creature to the cottage's life represents his wish of being part of the DeLacey's domestic economy and, consequently, being part of the 'inside' space. The symbolic arson of the abandoned cottage by the rejected Creature has to be read as a reaction to an irreversible refusal of this Creature's access to normative society, and the acceptance of spaces of sublimity which reverberate his inner feeling of alienation according to Romantic aesthetics. This analogy between (natural) spaces and inner being, in fact, is expressed by the Creature from the moment in which he begins his life at the DeLaceys'. As Carman notes, «Unlike his auditor Victor, the Creature views the sublimity of the earth with humbled reverence and awe rather than with scientific hubris. In exchange for the elevation of his spirits, he wishes to give back to his adopted family and sustain their habitat.»³⁸³

2.5.3 The Chamounix glacier

On the contrary, the image of the monster is associated, as per Victor's description to cold, deserted areas, such as the sighting of him near Chamounix, prior to their confrontation. The monster's appearance is noticed by Victor after an introspective reflection about his lost happiness after his little brother William's death, whom Victor will discover has in fact been killed by the monster as act of revenge against his creator:

[...] I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed. He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution; his stature also, as he approached, seemed to exceed that of man. [...] I perceived, as the shape came nearer (sight tremendous and abhorred!) that it was the wretch whom I had created. I trembled with rage and horror, resolving to wait his approach and then close with him in mortal combat.³⁸⁴

³⁸³ Carman, Colin, *The Radical Ecology of the Shelleys: Eros and Environment*. Routledge, 2018., p. 122

³⁸⁴ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 73

The sublime associated with the landscape of Chamounix, then, is amplified by the corporeal sublime of the gigantic monster's vision. The importance of the Chamounix scenario, as Susan Stryker³⁸⁵ and Eve Sedgwick³⁸⁶ show, is due to the process of mirroring and the construction of both Victor and the Creature's identities, and the Chamounix glacier is the heterotopic sanctuary of this ritual, which occurs by creating the possibility for the monster to revindicate his narration. As a queer corporeality within a queer heterotopia space, Frankenstein's monster rejects the perspective of the master and the scientific and medical discourse defended by Victor, whose view is nothing but «the standpoint of the Master, the Man, the One God, whose Eye produces, appropriates, and orders all differences», as contested by Donna Haraway.³⁸⁷ This consideration, if examined from a queer and feminist sensibility, enables us to understand knowledge, in this case Victor's vs. the Creature's, as a situated and therefore partial knowledge.

2.5.4 The Arctic poles

Finally, the Arctic constitutes not only the narrative frame scenario for Shelley's novel, but also functions as an extreme boundary which has already been crossed by both normative and othered identities. Further, it is both a metaphor of the ambition for scientific investigation which links Walton and Frankenstein by means of their desire for abjection/sublime, and which also constitutes the land of isolation and remoteness. Jacob Bachinger argues that, within the heterotopian space of the Arctic, Walton's ship is another heterotopia, since «Foucault's heterotopias are created spaces (such as gardens) as opposed to natural spaces (such as forests).»³⁸⁸ The sublimity of the Arctic scenario described by Walton is specular to the description of the Chamounix glacier in

³⁸⁵ Stryker, Susan, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*. New York University Press, 1996.

³⁸⁶ Blank, Isabelle, "Beyond Borders: The Arctic as a Queer Utopia in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." *The Foundationalist* Volume II, Issue I, 2019: pp. 2-9

³⁸⁷ Haraway, Donna, "Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective." *Feminist studies* 14.3, 1988, pp. 575-599., p. 193

³⁸⁸ Bachinger, Jacob, "The Arctic and "Other Spaces" in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." *at the EDGE* 1, 2010, pp. 158-174., p. 164

which Victor identifies the creature, as well as when Walton identifies Victor through the fog of the Poles:

...we were nearly surrounded by ice, which closed in the ship on all sides, scarcely leaving her the sea-room in which she floated. Our situation was somewhat dangerous, especially as we were compassed round by a very thick fog. (...) a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic stature, sat in the sledge and guided the dogs. We watched the rapid progress of the traveller with our telescopes until he was lost among the distant inequalities of the ice.³⁸⁹

Bachinger reminds us of the power of changeability associated with heterotopia, claiming that Walton himself, as witness to Frankenstein's story, is destined to spread the story of his Creature, while comparing Shelley's creative process and Walton's feeling of failure, comparing the Arctic poles both to a blank page and to a space of possibility:

Essentially, Walton hopes to transform himself to achieve "glory" (17) in the north. It is a hope that has particular poignancy for him, given his failure to achieve that glory as a poet (16). As a failed writer, he now no longer hopes to inscribe his achievement literally and literarily on the blank page, but metaphorically on the blankness of the Arctic, which in the early nineteenth century when Shelley was writing the novel (or at the end of the eighteenth century when Walton is voyaging north), was indeed a kind of tabula rasa, a blank slate waiting to be explored, mapped, narrated. Arguably, Walton is transformed, although this occurs when he is not actually voyaging, but instead when he is caught in the pack ice and unable to voyage any farther.³⁹⁰

Frankenstein also serves as a specular figure for Walton, as the ambitions for exploration and science have influenced the actions of both men. Therefore, Walton can view Victor Frankenstein's tale as a warning about the risks of defying knowledge and science, or as a starting point from which to deconstruct human subjectivity in favour of other identities.

³⁸⁹ Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. by Nora Crook, Vol.1, Pickering & Chatto, London, 1996, p. 16

³⁹⁰ Bachinger, Jacob, "The Arctic and "Other Spaces" in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*." *at the EDGE* 1, 2010, pp. 158-174., p. 166

Chapter Three

Angela Carter and the demystification of the monstrous female: myths, intertextuality, winged bodies, and deserted spaces

3.1. Introduction: 'Putting new wine in old bottles'

3.1.1. Angela Carter's feminist and corporeographic metafiction

In her interview with John Haffenden from 1986 in *Novelists in Interview*, where she is defined as a 'magical mannerist', Angela Carter responds to Haffenden's question on whether rewriting fairy tales for *The Bloody Chamber* was due to Carter's intention of «bringing fairy tales out of the area of the unconscious»³⁹¹. Haffenden asks Carter this question after having previously anticipated it with other references to psychoanalytic interpretations, such as Bruno Bettelheim's contribution to the topic. Bettelheim, in fact, according to Haffenden «takes the view that fairy tales use fantasy materials to reflect inner experiences and processes” suggesting that «they are ways of coping with unconscious processes».³⁹² Carter, as a matter of fact, takes distance from Haffenden's statements that aim to interpret her *Bloody Chamber* as a psychoanalytic feminist act of re-interpreting the literary tradition of European folk tales, and especially the role of women within it. Carter is, of course, interested in the psychoanalytic content of stories, but her interest is also to move away from Bettelheim's consolatory reading of the function of folktales. Carter not only specifies the myriad of possible interpretations of stories according to the *Zeitgeist*, she also recognises the authorial individualism which defines each story's moral or thematic uniqueness. While referring to her rewriting of *Beauty and the Beast* in *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter sarcastically comments the ending as an “advertisement for moral blackmail”, since «when the Beast says that he is dying because of Beauty, the only morally correct thing for her to have said at that point would be, 'Die, then'.»³⁹³

³⁹¹ Haffenden, John, *Novelists in interview*. Routledge, 2019. Kindle edition.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Ibid.

Therefore, when answering the question about what is Carter's aim in the rewriting folktales and whether this rewriting is due to her intention of coming out from the mechanisms of the unconscious, Carter answers Haffenden by putting in evidence her principle of de-mythicising writing: «My intention was not to do 'versions' or, as the American edition of the book said, horribly, 'adult' fairy tales, but to extract the latent from the traditional stories and to use it as the beginnings of new stories»³⁹⁴. This statement by Carter can be read in a specular way if compared to her famous expression of “putting new wine in old bottles” coined by Carter in her essay “Writing from the Front Line”, published in 1985 as well as Haffenden's interview. For Carter, as we will later observe, the symbol, just like the relationship between hypotext and hypertext (in Genettian taxonomy), represents a fundamental starting tool to enact the repetitive and counter-creative process of Carter's writing, as enounced by the metaphor of the new wine filling the old bottles that brings them to explode.

Continuing with Haffenden's interview, and Haffenden's own remark about how «fundamentally important it is [for Carter] to have an intelligent awareness of society» and how her stories and her use of fantastic (or magical) realism is preferred to a naturalist narrative, Carter mentions the creative process of the character of Tristessa from her novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). Carter explains how one of the key elements that led her to the creation of a film diva like Tristessa de St. Ange, who represents the epitome of the unattainable femme fatale reproduced in the image of the Hollywood divas of the 1950s, such as Greta Garbo, Bette Davis, or Rita Hayworth. This element, in fact, was the tagline for the 1946 film *Gilda*, directed by Charles Vidor, which reads 'There was never a woman like Gilda'. That, Carter explains, “may have been one of the reasons why I made my Hollywood star a transvestite, a man, because only a man could think of femininity in terms of that slogan.” Therefore, Angela Carter's use of citation related to popular culture in this case, as well as to literature, visual art, and music, is conjoined with her revisionist intent to use fiction as an instrument to

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

reflect on male cultural tradition, gender roles, and postmodern literature, transforming fiction into an exercise in dismantling the structures of the literary canon and the Eurocentric imaginary; this process echoes to an extent Linda Hutcheon's investigation on the liberating effect of postmodernism's decentering of cultures in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction*, published in 1988.³⁹⁵

Carter's use, or reactivation, of the figure of the Hollywood actress, seductive and ephemeral, is transformed into a grotesque, allegorical and political figure that demystifies both the Hollywood cinematic imagery to which the author refers for the creation of the character of Tristessa, and gender roles and their rigid and arbitrary line of demarcation, which becomes porous in front of the performativity of gender used by Tristessa. This performativity, in fact, continues until her last presence on stage, which makes her unmasking as a biological man coincides with her murder, leading to the death of the "transgender monster",³⁹⁶ the freak, and the re-establishment of the patriarchal supremacy and violence from the anarchic desert tribe of children that echoes Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. For Alessandra Di Luzio³⁹⁷, Tristessa as a symbol, especially if considered in relation to the cinematic world and to the objectifying and *looksist* male gaze (an expression used by Anna Kérchy in *Bodies that do not fit*)³⁹⁸, embodies the image of the screen as a mirror. Yet, at the same time the screen is the place where the body's metamorphosis occurs and where the critical object enacted by Carter through Tristessa is fulfilled. That is, «la sublimazione dell'essere in apparire e in definitiva la creazione dell'entità sacralizzata della *femme fatale*».³⁹⁹

³⁹⁵ See the chapter *Decentering the Postmodern: the Ex-centric*, in Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory and Fiction*, 1988, p.62.

³⁹⁶ Doyle, Sady, *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers. Monstrosity, Patriarchy and the Fear of Female Power* Melville House Publishing, 2019.

³⁹⁷ Di Luzio, Alessandra, *La visione persistente: percorsi intertestuali e intermediali nella scrittura di Angela Carter*. Vol. 31. Pàtron, 2008.

³⁹⁸ Ekmekçi, Çelik, *Body Politics in Angela Carter's works*. Diss. Istanbul Aydin University Institute of Social Sciences, 2018.

³⁹⁹ "the sublimation of being into appearing and ultimately the creation of the sacralized entity of the *femme fatale*" [my translation] in Di Luzio, Alessandra. *La visione persistente: percorsi intertestuali e intermediali nella scrittura di Angela Carter*. Vol. 31. Pàtron, 2008.

The ephemeral woman on the screen, therefore, as well as the fairy-tale characters narrated in *The Bloody Chamber*, are for Carter a figuration, a means through which to convey an imaginary that Christian Metz, talking about cinema (but I consider that this discourse can be equally applicable to the techniques of the imaginary used by Carter in her works, since they draw on different cultural means) defines in a Lacanian way as opposed to the symbolic but in continuous interlock with it. Metz thus designates «l'illusione fondamentale dell'Io, l'impronta definitiva di un prima dell'Edipo, il marchio duraturo dello specchio che aliena l'Uomo al riflesso di se stesso e ne fa il doppio del suo doppio.»⁴⁰⁰

Carter's writing and the genres to which her works can be traced oscillate between a mixture of styles and references, ranging from fantasy, to science fiction, to dystopia, to picaresque (Lucy Sargisson in "Contemporary Feminist Utopianism" defines *The Passion of New Eve* as 'a utopian/dystopian satire'), to Gothic literature, to the horror novel. Through the use of myth and characters built around a mythical or iconic matrix, such as that of the Hollywood diva in *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter herself defines her 1977 novel as "an anti-mythic novel", which nonetheless uses mythical material in order to question sex roles and the subject's identity boundaries, which in the works we are considering here as case studies turn out to be both symbolic and spatial/geographical boundaries. Maria Aline Seabra Ferreira recognises, in fact, in Angela Carter's work the presence of the "feminist fabulations" of which we have already spoken in chapter 1 coined by Marleen S. Barr, according to whom a feminist fabulation «describes a myth which exposes, subverts, and rewrites a patriarchal myth (...). Feminist fabulation enables readers to pioneer spaces beyond patriarchal boundaries» (xii).⁴⁰¹ What Barr specifies is that a feminist fabulation offers a «world clearly and radically discontinuous from the patriarchal one we know, yet returns to confront that known patriarchal world in some feminist cognitive way» (11).⁴⁰²

⁴⁰⁰ "the fundamental illusion of the Ego, the definitive imprint of a before Oedipus, the lasting mark of the mirror that alienates Man to the reflection of himself and makes him the double of his double" [my translation] (Metz, 1980: 10 quoted in. Di Luzio, 2008.

⁴⁰¹ Barr, Marleen S., "Feminist fabulation: Space/postmodern fiction." *Utopian Studies* 5.1, 1994.

⁴⁰² Barr, Marleen, "Feminist fabulation; or, playing with patriarchy vs. the masculinization of metafiction." *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14.2, 1987, pp. 187-191.

In this view, 'myth' as such takes on the postmodern interpretive dimension assigned to it by Roland Barthes, which according to Rebecca Munford can be seen in many ways as compatible with the feminist challenge to central patriarchal authority, and in Carter's use of quotations and references to tradition and culture.

In 1977, during an interview with Les Bedford, for Sheffield University Television, Carter is in a phase of transition from the so-called 'Bristol trilogy' (which includes the novels *Shadow Dance* (1966), *Several Perceptions* (1968) and *Love* (1971) and which is distinguished by a realist style, that of the 'kitchen sink novel', far removed from the speculative fiction with which Carter's style will be classified from there on) to her first science fiction novel, *Heroes and Villains*, published in 1969. In Bedford's interview, Carter not only recognises her new novel as a break with the previous realist novel, but at the same time, quoting Barthes, «I was beginning to regard the work that I was doing as external to myself [...] I was beginning to perceive text as text, as Barthes would say.» According to Munford, this shift in Carter's view of textuality is fundamental to the notion of writing as a space where one can no longer elaborate 'personal situations', but as a place where one can 'engage with ideas'. With this statement, Carter refers to a passage by Roland Barthes from *La Morte de l'Auteur*, in which the French philosopher states:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture...the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them.⁴⁰³

Angela Carter, therefore, shares with Roland Barthes the intention of 'desacralising' the image of the Author as God proposed in *La Morte de l'Auteur*, although I argue that the main difference between Carter's and Barthes' vision lies in the fact that Barthes clearly ignored the element of gender in his reflection,

⁴⁰³ Barthes, Roland, *The death of the author*, 1968. na, 2006.

which is fundamental for Carter's defiance of the patriarchal cultural imagery. Her intertextual strategy, in fact, renounces the impersonality proposed by Barthes «in a move to consider the specific historical and socio-cultural contexts for the construction of gendered subjectivities».⁴⁰⁴ This tension between the post-structuralist model of intertextuality and Carter's rejection of impersonality can be easily identified in one of the eponymous short stories in Carter's 1985 collection of short stories, *Black Venus*. The purpose of the collection is in fact to give voice to characters and stories relegated to silence by the affirmation of cultural images that have limited their agency. This is the case of Jeanne Duval, the Black Venus of the title of the collection, Creole lover and muse of Charles Baudelaire and his collection of poems *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Carter quotes poetic fragments from the Black Venus cycle, and in particular the poem "Le Serpent qui danse". In the poem Baudelaire creates a parallel between the image of the serpent, a biblical symbol of seduction and sin, and Jeanne's exotic, orientalisised body, Carter recontextualises these fragments, demystifying Duval as a muse-object and humanising her at the same time. This happens, as Munford explains, "by not only representing her as a historical subject, but by re-presenting her as an agent in history - as a re-birthing Black Venus rising from the ashes of Baudelaire's poetic"⁴⁰⁵. The refusal of the death of the author, thus, is unacceptable by Carter due to the necessity of her writing of re-exploring the agency of the neglected self and integrating it into a new narration.

Agreeing with Patricia Waugh's statement that within the post-structuralist scenario it is a feminist duty to «rediscover our histories (a sense of continuity in time), a sense of agency (how we can act upon the world), and to be able to reflect self-consciously upon what we take ourselves to,»⁴⁰⁶, Munford argues that «[i]n exposing the representational modes upon which constructions of identity and selfhood are contingent, Carter points up the possibilities of re-constructing identity»⁴⁰⁷.

⁴⁰⁴ Munford, Rebecca, ed. *Re-visiting Angela Carter: texts, contexts, intertexts*. Springer, 2006.

⁴⁰⁵ Ivi, p.9

⁴⁰⁶ Ivi, pp.30-31

⁴⁰⁷ Ivi, p.10

Carter's play with the cultural past and her original *excursus* within the tradition by means of her novels and short stories is always politically charged, and this aspect has always been considered as a tricky factor in Carter's definition as a postmodernist. As Lorna Sage declares in her essay, she is reluctant to define Carter as a tout-court postmodernist, since

The 'post'-ness of Carter's world-picture (post-industrial, post-imperial) suggests an obvious label: postmodern. I have been reluctant to use it, however, because it seems to me to convey a kind of terminal reflexiveness, a notion of fiction as a vacated fun-house, a spatialized model for narrative, which I don't think fits exactly. She had a position on the politics of textuality. She went in for the proliferation, rather than the death, of the author.⁴⁰⁸

Thus, although defining her work as an "intellectual bricolage",⁴⁰⁹ her postmodernism is distant from Frederic Jameson's view of this current as a capitalist, sterile game of repetition and pastiche-ness. According to Jameson, in fact, parody has been replaced by pastiche in modern era. «Pastiche is» he writes,

like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter.⁴¹⁰

For postmodernist feminism⁴¹¹, the parodic reference to tradition aims to denounce it, as occurs in Carter's short story with Baudelaire's objectifying practice of Jeanne Duval, move away from tradition while advocating a critical detachment against the tradition's hierarchical domination. Even the parodic genre mentioned by Jameson, never becomes a way of desecrating or mocking the tradition as a generative mechanism. Rather, Carter's use of citation becomes, as Di Luzio shows, a dialogue with the tradition on one hand, and with the reader on the other, who is called to be an active accomplice in this interlocutory re-signification of genres, images, symbols and styles.

⁴⁰⁸ Sage, Lorna, *Angela Carter*, Northcote House, Plymouth 1994, p. 58

⁴⁰⁹ P. Bono, Intervista con Angela Carter, in «D.W.F.», 2 (estate 1986), p. 100)

⁴¹⁰ Jameson, Frederic, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham NC 1991, p. 17

⁴¹¹ As well as for other critical currents that arise from a minority socio-historical context, such as postcolonialism, queer studies, African studies, etc.

As Linda Hutcheon explains, if we consider parody as an «integrated structural modelling process of revising, inverting, and “trans-contextualizing” previous works of art», it appears clear how the citational mechanism of Carter's writing and re-exploration of myths has a regenerative ambition. Metanarrative, Hutcheon explains, «fa uso della parodia e dell'imitazione per giungere a una nuova forma che sia altrettanto seria e valida, come sintesi, quanto la forma che essa tenta dialetticamente di superare»⁴¹². A (female and) feminist use of the past and its cultural male production is, as Elaine Showalter comments, «a 'double-voiced discourse' that always embodies the social, literary, and cultural heritage of both the muted and the dominant»,⁴¹³ an idea of 'doubleness' which clearly evokes the subversive power of the Bakhtinian dialogism, that Showalter expands as feminist practice of empowerment.

To rewrite, in order to revise and negotiate social and identity boundaries, becomes a fundamental practice of cultural resistance for the writing female subject, in order to modify across time the perception of the images conceived by a male-dominated cultural history. A great contribution to this cultural practice is made by the North American poet and critic Adrienne Rich, with her essay *When we Dead Awaken*, where Rich calls this feminist practice 'writing as revision', and advocates the right of women writers to reappropriate themselves in the cultural and historical imagination. As Rich writes,

Re-vision-the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction-is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore live-afresh. A change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order re-assert itself in every new revolution. We need to know the writing of the past, and

⁴¹² Hutcheon, Linda, “Il paradosso metanarrativo. Modi e forme del narcisismo letterario”, in C. Bacchilega (a cura di), *Narrativa postmoderna in America*, Roma, 1986, pp. 28-29

⁴¹³ Showalter, Elaine, "Feminist criticism in the wilderness." *Critical Inquiry* 8.2, 1981, pp. 179-205.

know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.⁴¹⁴

In Carter's pastiche, then, as shown by Di Luzio, there are two different citational (quotational) levels, a more classic one, defined as "homomateric citation", and a second and more transcultural one, called "heteromateric citation". In the first case, we are dealing with literary citations, such as allusions to the hypotexts considered as matrix for the re-writing process, re-writings, and "convocazioni citazionali"⁴¹⁵.

The short story collection *The Bloody Chamber*, published in 1979, is an example of homomateric citation, although Carter defies the Genettian transtextual modalities while extending her citational process to transmedial references. The homomateric citation, in fact, is referring to not only a transmediatic use of references (richiami) to culture, literature, art and thus to what Di Luzio defines as "construtti culturali", but also to "construtti fattuli", meaning historical facts and characters which, when rewritten and re-investigated, acquire a rehabilitating allure. This occurs, as seen, in the case of Jeanne Duval as 'Black Venus', or Edgar Allan Poe's Mother in *The Cabinet of Edgar Allan Poe*, or the American murderer Lizzie Borden, represented both in *The Fall River Axe Murders* and in *Lizzie's Tiger*.⁴¹⁶

Reading, therefore, is as an imaginative a process as writing is. As Carter declares in her short essay *Writing from the Front Line*, «most intellectual development depends upon new readings of old texts. I am all for putting new wine in old bottles, especially if the pressure of the new wine makes the old bottles explode».⁴¹⁷ Here, Carter openly clarifies her position as a socio-politically situated feminist writer who gives the reader the chance to construct «her own fiction for herself from the elements of my fictions».⁴¹⁸ Speaking about the functions of myths in her literary imagery, she posits herself in a deconstructionist perspective, claiming:

⁴¹⁴ Rich, Adrienne, *When we dead awaken: Writing as re-vision*, 1980: 35

⁴¹⁵ Di Luzio, Alessandra, *La visione persistente: percorsi intertestuali e intermediali nella scrittura di Angela Carter*. Vol. 31. Pàtron, 2008., pp. 34-36

⁴¹⁶ Ibid.

⁴¹⁷ Carter, Angela, *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*. Random House, 2013., p. 46

⁴¹⁸ Ivi, p. 45

Therefore I become mildly irritated (I'm sorry!) when people, as they sometimes do, ask me about the "mythic quality" of work I've written lately. Because I believe that all myths are products of the human mind and reflect only aspects of material human practice.

I'm in the demythologising business.

I'm interested in myths -- though I'm much more interested in folklore -- just because they are extraordinary lies designed to make people unfree. (Whereas, in fact, folklore is a much more straightforward set of devices for making real life more exciting and is much easier to infiltrate with different kinds of consciousness.)⁴¹⁹

This statement on her conscious 'demythologizing' business is joined with Carter's explicit materialist vocation, permitting her to recognise her socio-cultural and historical position, accepting that she is «the pure product of an advanced, industrialised, post-imperialist country in decline»⁴²⁰ while also recognising her tendency to investigate the “social fictions that regulate our lives. Blake calls this the 'mind forg'd manacles' that bring Carter to recognise the shaping of a 'committed materialism' that governs society, and that brings her to situate the body within this scenario, as embodied experience of otherness, ex-centric alterity and diverging embodied experiences, including patriarchy. Carter recognises the importance of a de-centralising practice of culture that will end the West supremacy as a hierarchical model of civilisation, aiming to attain a non-hierarchical, Deleuzian idea of culture. According to Carter,

...Western European civilisation as we know it has just about run its course and the emergence of the women's movement, and all that implies, is both symptom and product of the unravelling of the culture based on Judaeo-Christianity, a bit of Greek transcendentalism via the father of lies, Plato, and all the other bits and pieces. As a Japanese friend of mine once said, the spotlight of history is moving inexorably away from Europe towards Asia and Africa -- societies that we (and white women can't get out of our historic complicity in colonialism, any more than the white working class can) comprehensively screwed, that owe us nothing and expect nothing whatsoever from us, which is just as well as the idea we might actually owe them something, like cash, doesn't go down too well, certainly in Britain. It is possible, assuming Western Europe is permitted to sidle out of the spotlight of history rather than going up with a bang, that, for the first time for a thousand years or so, its inhabitants may at last be free of their terrible history.⁴²¹

To demythologise Western European culture also means to enact a metamorphosis meant not only to redefine the subject's position and difference

⁴¹⁹ Ivi, p. 47

⁴²⁰ Ivi, p.49

⁴²¹ Ibid.

as a pejorative otherness, but also to consider that very metamorphosis as a constructive, evolutionary process, as in Rosi Braidotti's metaphor of 'snake's skin', previously mentioned in Chapter 1. This image stimulates a nomadic and non-unitarian vision of the subject without ignoring the importance of embodiment as a «dynamic and complex phenomenon of reworking affects, attachments, and separations» and its situatedness within the symbolic order. According to Braidotti, in fact,

codes and rules are tattooed on your bodily system, so to speak. Because the implications of the phallogocentric institutionalization of sexuality are written on our bodies, they are complex, in that they are enfleshed. Thus women who yearn for change cannot shed their old skins like snakes. Feminists cannot hope to merely cast off their sexed identity like an old garment.⁴²²

Therefore, within this process of challenging of social structures and the power discourses in Angela Carter's writing, it is possible to notice her recognition of how both history and fiction are viewed as fabricated ideological constructs that, despite their fabrication, establish a historical and cultural centrality. Patricia Waugh defines this literary device as 'metafiction', as the «function of being in the position of examining the old rules in order to discover new possibilities of the game»⁴²³, a concept that represents well Carter's demythologising mission of “putting new wine in old bottles”. In 1988, Linda Hutcheon returns to Waugh's concept of metafiction by defining as 'historiographic metafiction' the «theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs that aims to create the necessary “grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past [...]».⁴²⁴ What Hutcheon aims to explain by showing this postmodernist literary device is how, by applying a historical revision to each text a historical revision, it is possible to see how both history and writing are driven by «ideological and

⁴²² Braidotti, Rosi, *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory*. Columbia University Press, 1983, p. 103

⁴²³ Waugh, Patricia, *Metafiction: the theory and practice of self-conscious fiction*. Routledge, 2002, p.42

⁴²⁴ Hutcheon, Linda, *A poetics of postmodernism: History, theory, fiction*. Routledge, 2003., p.5

institutional analysis, including the analysis of the act of writing itself»⁴²⁵, which is the founding idea of the 'New Historicism'.⁴²⁶

In fact, as Anna Pasolini clarifies in her study on Angela Carter entitled *Bodies that bleed*, Carter's acknowledgment of history and fiction as equal ideological constructions does not aim to a relativism which can be dangerous for the feminist movement. Instead, «the outcome of Carter's self-reflective fiction is rather disturbance and challenge of taken-for-granted narratives, which does not mean that they are made obsolete, but rather rethought and confronted with alternative possibilities»⁴²⁷

Anna Kérchy, a Senior professor at the University of Szeged in Hungary, recognises the fundamental role that postmodern historiographic metafiction has had within Carter's literary works. In her essay *Body-Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic point of view*, Kérchy focuses on Carter's last three novels (*The Passion of New Eve*, 1977; *Nights at the Circus*, 1984; *Wise Children*, 1991), while playing with Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction, and coining the new expression 'corporeographic metafiction'. Since Kérchy's view considers the grotesque and monstrous body found in Carter's literary works as a crucial figuration for transgression and crisis of signification,⁴²⁸ Kérchy also believes in Carter's empowering intention of seeing anomalous female and queer anatomies as parts of her project of rewriting myths and traditions. Thus, as Solbine Coelsh-Foisner clarifies,⁴²⁹ a corporeographic metafiction renders the body as being «regarded as a palimpsestic space of polyphonous, antagonistic texts»⁴³⁰. Therefore, by corporeographic metafiction, Kérchy not only wants to describe a narrative which destabilises and discusses “the social construction of history, fiction, identity and body”, but also wants to highlight that

⁴²⁵ Ivi, p.91

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Pasolini, Anna, "Bodies that bleed: metamorphosis in Angela Carter's fairy tales." *Bodies that bleed*, 2016, pp. 1-137.

⁴²⁸ Kérchy as well owes her critical approach to Mary Russo and Michail Bakhtin's contribution

⁴²⁹ Kérchy, Anna, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic Point of View*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2008.

⁴³⁰ Ivi, Foreword, iv

corporeagraphic metafiction [...] intertwines a critique of the ideological inscription on the paradoxically abjectified-mystified feminised body, and a critique of the canon formations marginalizing the engendered corpus of women's literature. It also traces alternative transcripts of non-normative femininities, and illuminates palimpsestic potentials through which subjects' disciplinary cultural embodiments may be subversively (re)incarnated by means of a grotesque corporeality. Monologic prescriptions may be repeatedly rewritten via corporeally motivated, polyphonic, open texts generated by the fantastic freakish heroines.⁴³¹

Consequently, Kérchy re-elaborates the idea⁴³² that «cultural preconceptions, knowledge and anxiety about the body shape the narrative, in particular its stylistic, structural design or 'self-diffusion.'», and bringing to an unavoidable interrelatedness between corporeality and textuality, while performing Peter Brook's simultaneous study of the 'semioticization of the body'⁴³³. Kérchy defines this interrelatedness as 'body-texts', meaning «texts whose bodily phenomena are matched by generic properties and narrative strategies»⁴³⁴, and whose close reading aims to analyse the potentiality of the «subversive counter-performances of bodies, texts, identity and femininity—particularly in their connection with the grotesque or the freak alterity.»⁴³⁵

3.1.2. Rethinking femininity: Abjection and monstrosity in Carter

According to Carter, as for other feminist writers of her time like Adrienne Rich, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, the traditional literary genres will never be useful means for the female voice and the female experience due to their patriarchal logics. Therefore, a feminist body-text becomes for Carter the necessary practice by means of which it is possible to apply a new vision both to corporeality and to the literary product. As Carter explains to Lorna Sage, «I do think that we are at the end of a line, and to a certain extent I'm making a conscious critique of the culture I was born to. In a period like this of transition and conflicting ideologies, when there isn't a prevalent ideology, really all artists

⁴³¹ Ivi, p.8

⁴³² See Punday, Daniel, "Foucault's body tropes." *New Literary History* 31.3, 2000, pp. 509-528. and Punday, Daniel. *Narrative bodies: Toward a corporeal narratology*. Springer, 2003.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Ivi, Foreword, i

⁴³⁵ Ivi, p.3

can do is to go around chopping up».⁴³⁶ In fact, as Carter will write in *The Language of Sisterhood*, while commenting on the importance of feminist critique, female texts are seen as “monstrous hybrids” (she is commenting on Rich's *Of Woman Born*'s influence on the feminist movement), indefinite works when compared to traditional texts and if analysed according to traditional parameters: «The nascent discipline of women's studies accretes its set texts. It is, after all, very rarely possible for new ideas to find adequate expression in old forms».⁴³⁷

I believe that Carter's definition of female-written texts as monstrous hybrids aiming to create “new expressions in old forms” echoes Mary Shelley's invitation to her 'hideous progeny' (in Shelley's case meaning the female Gothic and her posthuman monster) to proliferate while creating new forms and realising of having satisfied a partial accomplishment of that suggestion by Shelley. Further, it also satisfies Kérchy's idea of Carter's texts as corporeographic ones, showing how a new literary politics means for feminist writers a new, eccentric depiction of corporeality that overcomes and subverts the binary distance between the Self and its tradition and a body that is seen as objectified monster/object/grotesque, but adopts her condition of embodied otherness as a weapon of resistance and counter-narration. In addition, Nicoletta Caputo believes that the play that Carter enacts between the past and tradition aims to the reshaping of tradition generates what Caputo defines as a multi-discursive and all-encompassing woman, multifaceted and capable of adapting herself to various cultural languages. Caputo believes that the act of linking different literary and artistic genres and styles back to women is meant to show how the female experience can encompass everything.

Therefore, Caputo defines Carter's women as 'pancultural' and 'pansexual' because of her capacity to appropriate of typically masculine roles of power. Vice versa, when a male is deprived of his role of power, as occurs in the case of Evelyn in *The Passion of New Eve*, who becomes Eve and simultaneously a

⁴³⁶ Sage, Lorna, "The savage sideshow: a profile of Angela Carter." *New Review* 4.39/40, 1977, pp. 51-57, p. 56

⁴³⁷ Carter, Angela, *The Language of Sisterhood*, in L. Michaels & C. Ricks, *The State of Language*, California University Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London 1980, p.228).

biological female, this occurs in order to mock gender binaries, misogyny and patriarchy, exalting the evidence of a fender performativity behind whose curtain normative society intends to conceal itself⁴³⁸. The aerialist Sophie Fevvers, the main character in *Nights at the Circus*, is the perfect example of this idea of female 'all-encompassing-ness'. She is voracious, starving, greedy for both money and experiences, and represents a grotesque version of the Victorian New Woman. As Salman Rushdie comments, her trapeze-art is a metaphor for her characters' capability to cross borders. Fevvers moves from London, her homeland, where she is celebrated as the 'Cockney Venus', to Saint Petersburg, and finally to Siberia, constantly trespassing extreme and unknown borders. Fevvers embodies, through her grotesque unclassifiability and her role of 'trickster' (Kérchy) an explicit female refusal to be reduced to an objectified being. We see this refusal from Fevvers, whether to be venerated as an object of beauty, as the Grand Duke, who wants to transform her into a Fabergé egg, aims to; or to be entertained and surprised by her freak bird-body, as the public that observes her at the circus does; or finally to demystify her, as the American journalist Jack Walsler tries to do, while disguising himself as a clown in order to join the circus and follow her on tour around the world, apparently to discover the truth about Fevvers' monstrosity, whether it is an artifice or not.

However, Carter's characters' refusal to be objectified is a *fil rouge* that spans her literary works. When she presents characters who are objectified or dehumanised, these women are a strategical embodiment of a reaction to the male imaginary that attempts to see them only as silent dolls functional to their - men's- erotic desires (as in the short story *The Loves of Lady Purple* from *Fireworks* (1969), which I will further analyse), crystal androids nurturing the masculine mirage of beauty (as occurs to Albertina, the daughter of the puppeteer and illusionist-machinist, Dr. Hoffmann, from *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman*), sexualised, childish Sadeian fantasies of femininity (as in the case of *The Snow Child* from *The Bloody Chamber*), or otherwise as disgusting monsters

⁴³⁸ Caputo, Nicoletta, 'New Wine in Old Bottles'. *Il bricolage intellettuale di Angela Carter in "Nights at the Circus"*. Vol. 1. Bibliotheca Aretina, 2010., p. 16

(as the castrating mother from the community of Beulah in *The Passion of New Eve*, or the vampire 'belle aux bois dorment' in *The Lady of the House of Love*, or the becoming-animal woman from *Wolf-Alice*, both from *The Bloody Chamber*). The hybridism of the monstrous female text that Carter claimed in *The Language of Sisterhood* is thus echoed in her female characters, as well as in her literary works, that move from folktales, to the genre of science-fiction, to utopia, to dystopia, to the picaresque postmodern novel, to the horror and Gothic genre. As Gina Wisker states, speaking of Carter's horror production, her horrific monsters criticise, parody and expose the primeval (masculine) underlying sexual terrors together with the dichotomy of desire and disgust towards female sexuality. Carter's women, Wisker explains, «reject the roles of victims, puppets, pawns, of deadly sexual predators or hags, instead defining and seizing their own sexuality and agency, having the last laugh». ⁴³⁹ Wisker clearly traces Carter's influence as a horror and Gothic writer to her male American predecessor, Edgar Allan Poe, as Carter herself will declare in her afterword to *Fireworks*:

«I'd always been fond of Poe, and Hoffman [sic], Gothic tales, cruel tales, tales of wonder, tales of terror, fabulous narratives that deal directly with the imagery of the unconscious-mirrors; the externalised self; forsaken castles; haunted forests; forbidden sexual objects»⁴⁴⁰.

In another television interview with Les Bedford in 1977 Carter recognised how Poe's writing represented a source of inspiration for her atmospheres, tropes, and imagery:

«I have a kind of familial attachment to Poe. I've used him a lot decoratively, but never structurally. I don't know if that makes sense. [...] I've used a lot of the imagery from Poe. I say I've used it, I've used it as a starting point for imagery of my own».⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁹ Wisker, Gina, "Disgust, desire and dead women: Angela Carter's re-writing women's fatal scripts from Poe and Lovecraft", in *The Arts of Angela Carter: A Cabinet of Curiosities*, Published to University Press Scholarship Online

⁴⁴⁰ Carter, Angela, "Afterword to Fireworks." *Burning Your Boats: Collected Stories*, 1995, pp. 459-460.

⁴⁴¹ Munford, Rebecca, ed. *Re-visiting Angela Carter: texts, contexts, intertexts*. Springer, 2006., p.180

Poe and Carter, in fact, have as common aspect to their stories: the tendency to apply a process of destabilisation of normality by means of the presence of the element of terror. Poe's topics of horror often begin with storytelling and the building up of a context of suspense and horror, and proceed with the defamiliarisation of everyday life, applying a mix of body horror, supernatural elements, realism and psychology. H.P. Lovecraft recognises Poe's ability for developing psychological horror «from the depths of our fears and dreams so that his spectres thus acquired a convincing malignity».⁴⁴² Poe's horror denounces the inner and hidden nature of human beings behind conventions and experiments with them by mixing up the disturbing, paranormal element with the known world of relationships, family, identity, time, history and domesticity.

As Mark Jancovich explains, the structures of horror narratives «are said to set out from a situation of order, move through a period of disorder caused by the eruption of horrifying or monstrous forces, and finally reach a point of closure and completion in which disruptive, monstrous elements are contained or destroyed and the original order is re-established.»⁴⁴³ This re-establishment of order that preceded the introduction of the horror element is a rare issue in Poe's writing, where horror and the monstrous forces that evoke it annihilate any stability and equilibrium. In Poe's work, the world of the dead and the world of the living constantly communicate with each other, and Death tends to re-establish a balance while devastating the human egocentrism, as occurs in *The Masque of the Red Death*, 1842, whereas Death is the unwelcome guest, dressed in red, at a rich man's opulent party. At this part, guests celebrate the lack of interest of Noblemen for the poor people dying of a Plague pandemic outside the walls of the castle.

As much in Poe's writing as in Carter's, the destabilisation generated by the horror elements does not aim to let the horror develop and then be substituted by a re-establishment of an initial situation of order which existed before said horror. Carter also explores the tropes of deceit, repression, the explosion of the

⁴⁴² Lovecraft, Howard Phillips, *Supernatural horror in literature*. The Palingenesis Project (Wermod and Wermod Publishing Group), 2013.

⁴⁴³ Jancovich, Mark, *Horror*. BT Batsford Ltd, 1992.

unfamiliar and the unpleasant, terror, violence and female disempowerment, which are typical Gothic elements. Her overcoming of the canonical parameters of the genre and the inspirational narrative matrix of horror presented by Poe's works at first is based upon alternatives and reworks of those traditional images of supernatural horror literature. Carter expands on and develops them with her comic and counternarrative verve. As Wisker states, «she stirs together a wicked (both evil, and celebrated) mix of Gothic horror's terrifying, entrapping paralysis and the energetic agency of the imaginative and actively liberating comic, the carnivalesque». ⁴⁴⁴ Wisker defends the idea that for Carter there is no dichotomic oppositional Manicheism which will distinguish the characters as well as human nature. Therefore, the Self and the Other share a common field of re-negotiation just as good and evil and so on, refusing to privilege one interpretation over the other or one version of the Self and events:

Conventional horror would have it that we are dangerously split selves: the Other, or other side of self, dramatized as abject, a danger to our accepted, socially acceptable, sane, conformist self. Carter rejects this blinkered simplification. In her work, the yoking of opposites in language, techniques and descriptions – mixing the historically realistic and the metaphorical, fantastic and imaginative – enacts the attraction and terror of what could otherwise seem comfortably relegated to nightmare and myth, that which emerges in conventional horror only to be packed away again in closure. ⁴⁴⁵

It is an interesting and revolutionary approach to Otherness bringing us to consider it as a refusal to create diametral borders and to rather view it as a part of ourselves. This re-consideration of Otherness, hence, matches perfectly with Julia Kristeva's work on abjection as alterity and her attempt to recognise how accepting otherness as part of the self is the first step to overcome the need for scapegoats, victims, and enemies. Her essay *Strangers to ourselves* (1988) moves from her previous analysis of abjection from *Powers of Horror* (1980) and develops the idea of 'recognizing our uncanny strangeness' in order to expose the boundaries of Western patriarchal-based horror and enact a politics of racial and political equality. This, Kristeva maintains, is important, because «by

⁴⁴⁴ Munford, Rebecca, ed. *Re-visiting Angela Carter: texts, contexts, intertexts*. Springer, 2006., p.180

⁴⁴⁵ Ivi, p.193

recognizing our uncanny strangeness we shall neither suffer from it nor enjoy it from the outside. The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners. If I am a foreigner, then there are no foreigners.»⁴⁴⁶

Like Kristeva in her essay, Carter's horror advocates not only a rejection of abjection as category for otherness and anti-subjectivity, instead seeing it as an inner element of the self, but also criticises a cultural and traditional oppressive heritage that must exist for the category of the Abject-as-Other to survive. Rather, her writing embraces horror as a liberating force and uses carnivalesque irony as the expression of a hiatus of resistance from the Abject. Carter adopts Leslie Fiedler's comment on the American novel, stating that «The Gothic mode is essentially a form of parody, a way of assailing clichés by exaggerating them to the limits of grotesqueness»⁴⁴⁷ Even in horror writing, the grotesque and the parodic force of the grotesque manage to enact their disruptive power of renewal. James Donald agrees with this revolutionary relationship between horror and carnivalesque individuating this renewal in the topic of the 'vampire feast' and claiming it a “feast of becoming, change and renewal”. Furthermore, for Donald carnival exalts negotiation and dialogue as fundamental passages to subvert social hierarchies, therefore creating an exchange between normative identities and monstrous embodiments. Wisker, in fact, praises Carter's ability to use this strategy to establish a relationship:

Typically turning the world upside down, carnival creates a cathartic alternative to established values and meanings, and as such it enables dialogue between beliefs and behaviours, rather than insisting on one right way. Above all, carnival recognizes the vital relationship between opposites. And it is in the spirit of carnival that Carter seizes on each and every opportunity to yoke opposites together.⁴⁴⁸

Furthermore, Wisker claims that one of the genres in Carter's writing where the link between the grotesque body, carnivalesque potential and mocking of patriarchal values is more evident is domestic horror, as it manages to focus on

⁴⁴⁶ Kristeva, Julia, *Strangers to ourselves*. Columbia University Press, 1991.

⁴⁴⁷ Fiedler, Leslie, "Love and Death in the American Novel." *Criterion*, New York, 1960., p. 452

⁴⁴⁸ Bristow, Joseph, and Trev Lynn Broughton, *The infernal desires of Angela Carter: fiction, femininity, feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.120

«the family home and the locus of patriarchal tyrannies, large and small, putting the spotlight on the werewolf in the kitchen [*The company of Wolves*, from *The Bloody Chamber*, 1979] and the blood and feathers on the dinner table.»⁴⁴⁹

Thus, by making the domestic space a horrifying place, Carter aims to explore Kristeva's definition of the abject, especially the relationship between the first object of abjection, the maternal body, and the «extradition of women from predominantly male social territory to the borders of imagination»⁴⁵⁰. It is clear then that the archaic fear of the mother's body is related to the fear of her annihilating power and generating power as terrifying sources of life. Hence, this leads the patriarchal order to consider a sexually aware woman as a danger to its structure.

Women's bodies become, in this way, a target on cultural fear and loathing because of the living and/or destructive forces that they might release. Luce Irigaray's point of view in *Speculum* on the relation between women and the Other is worth analysing: «In this proliferating desire of the same, death will be the only representative of an outside, of a heterogeneity, of an other: women will assume the function of representing death.»⁴⁵¹ This powerful figuration adopted by Irigaray of a death-embodied-woman is due to a male desire to control death and to overcome the monstrous female menace and make it vulnerable. However, in Carter's horror, her female monsters refuse death and rise up from the dead (as *The Lady in The House of Love* and *The Loves of Lady Purple*), aiming to live and subvert the masculine sexually repressive imagery. As Victor Burgin states in *Geometry and abjection* when commenting on Kristeva's work, the idea of otherness related to women brings us either to an idealisation or to a rejection and marginalisation: «This peripheral and ambivalent position allocated to woman, says Kristeva, has led to that familiar division of the field of representations in which women are viewed as either saintly or demonic-

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁵¹ Irigaray, Luce, *Speculum or the other woman*. Cornell University Press, 1985., p.27

according to whether they are seen as bringing the darkness, or as keeping it out»⁴⁵²).

As I will show in the analysis of Carter's short stories where monstrosity related to the female body will function by analogy or contrast as a revisionist reconfiguration of the image of female monstrosity, it will be possible to find this analogy and contrast in two of Carter's novels that I will focus on, and that Kérchy includes in the author's body-texts trilogy. These are, specifically, *The Passion of New Eve* and *Nights at the Circus*, published in 1977 and 1984 respectively. However, as we will see, it is possible to find elements of grotesqueness or monstrosity in other novels by Carter too, such as in *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffmann* (1972), and even in her early novels, as illustrated by Di Luzio⁴⁵³. Therefore, it will be necessary for my investigation to trace a continuum of monstrosity in Carter's works when related to abjection, the relationship subject/object, patriarchy and cultural imagery.

As in the previous chapters, a final section of this chapter will be dedicated to the role of spaces in Carter's novels and their function of placement for the normative and anti-normative bodies, as well as places dedicated to a deconstruction of this dichotomic distinction and the performativity of those roles which are intrinsic in it. The vampiric femme fatale, the necrophiliac Japanese marionette, the wolf-girl, the Oriental black Venus⁴⁵⁴, the glass-android-image-lady, the forced-to-be-a-transgender-beauty, the retired drag queen-old Hollywood-diva, the Victorian winged-Cockney New Woman are all figurations functional to Carter's 'demythologizing business' of pulling out the females subject from cultural subalternity and the cultural production of femininity.

In her essay on the characters from the Marquis de Sade's works, *The Sadeian Woman & the Ideology of Pornography* (1978) [n.b. That I will further look below when analysing her novel *The Passion of New Eve*], Carter not only

⁴⁵² Burgin, Victor, in John Fletcher & Andrew Benjamin, *Abjection, melancholia and love: essays on the work of Julia Kristeva*, London: Routledge, 1990, p.116

⁴⁵³ Di Luzio, Alessandra, *La visione persistente: percorsi intertestuali e intermediali nella scrittura di Angela Carter*. Vol. 31. Pàtron, 2008., p. 37

⁴⁵⁴ Munford, Rebecca, ed. *Re-visiting Angela Carter: texts, contexts, intertexts*. Springer, 2006., p.87

rejects the “sacralisation” of sex, defining it as an operation which is only apparently opposite to pornography, that limits women to become a passive hyperbolic fleshed object functional to the masculine visual and sexual pleasure. Sacralisation, in fact, aims to the universality of human experience, including the female one, and generates an essentialist mystification which has no difference from the archetypes functional to pornography to rigidly iconise sexual difference while associating Man with a positive/active element and woman to a negative sign of nullity. Hence, in Carter, for whom «narrative is an argument stated in fictional form»⁴⁵⁵, parody and its desecrating function of cultural imaginary are adopted, as De Sade does, with his women (Carter says) not as a negation of this imaginary but as a tool for a dialogic crossing of it, in order to re-actualise narrative according to new modes that will provide a new generation of desiring monstrous subjects, presented and theorised in *The Sadeian Woman*: «A free woman in an unfree society will be a monster. Her freedom will be a condition of personal privilege that deprives those on which she exercises it of her own freedom. The most extreme kind of this deprivation is murder. These women murder».⁴⁵⁶

A diachronic analysis of Carter's representation of femininity and female monstrosity is useful to observe her feminist critical project of the liberation of femininity from the cultural imagery. As Christina Britzolakis points out, there is a passage in Carter's narrative from the representation of «women who are in danger of being turned into fetishised, puppet-like objects by a male master-what Carter calls the mad scientist/shaman/toymaker figure» and those who embrace the role of victims of male cruelties and their shift to a hybrid-beastly bird woman owner of her destiny and of the female regions of air, as Fevvers is. Paulina Palmer defines this passage as an evolution from the 'coded mannequin' to the 'bird woman' that aims to a utopian and celebratory idea of femininity. Even the Chance sisters from Carter's last novel, *Wise Children* (1991), are performers like Fevvers and can manage their stage, their performances and their picaresque

⁴⁵⁵ Suleiman, Susan Rubin, "(Re) writing the body: The politics and poetics of female eroticism." *Poetics today* 6.1/2, 1985, pp. 43-65.

⁴⁵⁶ Carter, Angela, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, Virago, 2006, p. 131

narrative destiny, manipulating their acting for their own necessity. Furthermore, as Kelly Hurley shows in her essay on *The Gothic Body*, the interrelatedness that male science has always read in women as

entities defined by and entrapped within their bodies, in contrast to the man, who is governed by rationality and capable of transcending the fact of his embodiment, has brought to consider as pathological both the woman's body and the woman's identity, as well as to relate female identity with female sexuality and its abhumanness that brings to Freud and his theories on fetishism as the "mother's body, uncanny and archaic."⁴⁵⁷

Carter rewrites fetishism, as we will see in the following section, not only to contest it and create a new image of femininity, but also to show how fetishism is already a fiction (or rewriting) of the real image of women. Narrating fetishism is narrating of abhumanness, a term coined by Kelly Hurley to define a «not-quite-human subject, characterised by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, of becoming other»⁴⁵⁸ and which Hurley uses to describe the monstrous characters of Gothic literature and their influence in relation to 19th century authors like Baudelaire, Poe, de Sade, the French Symbolists and the *fin-de-siècle* Decadents, who all focused on a «metaphorization of femininity in its most fetishised and spectacular forms.»⁴⁵⁹ This becomes an act of counter-narration and a way to render the female fetish a figuration (a speaking figuration) of the male use of women as symbols, either of good or evil, saint or whore -- in any case, objectified (or rather, 'abjectified') figures. Lucie Armitt states that Carter's short stories (referring to *The Bloody Chamber* in particular) are «(inter)textual metamorphoses of both the fairy-tale and [...] anti-conventional readings of women's pleasure», and claims that her short stories are not fairy-tales charged with Gothic elements, but actually «Gothic tales that prey upon the restrictive enclosures of fairy-story formulae in a manner that threatens to become 'masochistically' self-destructive.»⁴⁶⁰ This

⁴⁵⁷ Broughton, Trev Lynn, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.49

⁴⁵⁸ Hurley, Kelly, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the fin de siècle*. Vol. 8. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁴⁵⁹ Broughton, Trev Lynn, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.49

⁴⁶⁰ Ivi, p.89

means that to understand her deconstructive work on the literary tradition, it will be important to abandon Bettelheim's idea of the fairy-tale as a consolatory safe space made of formulaic and stereotyped functions and to look at these motifs as problematic and ready-to-explode. However, the "masochistic pleasure of unpleasure" is a strategy Carter adopts just to destabilise the safe space of traditional models, and that, according to Armit, is the pathway for the Gothic narrative elements that characterise her stories due to the Gothic's transcendence of formulaic conventions and the absence of protective bounds. In this regard, an epitome of Carter's play with the themes of abjection, objectification, masochistic destabilisation of genres and bodily metamorphoses is the short story *The Snow Child* (*The Bloody Chamber*, 1979) where Carter explores the Snow White motif while confronting the image of a young girl who exists as fetishistic fantasy of a Count, and who is «created to be consumed», as she is idled, dead-hurt, posthumously raped and then destined to melt in the snow.⁴⁶¹ Armit describes her while associating her to a voracious vampiric female monster (as a parallelism for the collection's next story, *The Lady of the House of Love*). However, as we will see, Armit also comments that Carter's female figures, even when seeming passive victims, «are depicted as metamorphic figures oscillating along the boundaries between the human and the bestial, because they are anatomical representations (perhaps even portrait manifestations) of the transgressive and untamed excess of their own sexual practices»⁴⁶². Nevertheless, Armit specifies the strategic function of these figurations of hypersexuality, specifying how their metamorphic nature influences and communicates with all the other characters from her work, in a dialogue between female monsters

[...] since *The Bloody Chamber* functions less as a collection of individual short stories and more as a single narrative which uses the short story medium to work and rework compulsive repetitions, it should also come as no surprise that both these narrative metamorphoses and the metamorphic forms they depict work to destabilize each other from within. It is not simply that the eponymous *Lady of the House of* is a metamorphic character within the frame of her own text but that, beyond the limits of

⁴⁶¹ Ivi, p.91

⁴⁶² Ivi, p.56

that frame, she crops up in the guise of the eponymous *Tiger's Bride* and/or the wolf's lover in *The Company of Wolves*.⁴⁶³

I would add that it is possible to consider this 'metamorphic' interchange in Carter's writing as a continuum traversing her short stories and novels, and shaping a grotesque female monster that, from the Gothic dead-women and *femmes fatales* of her first collections (*Fireworks* and *The Bloody Chamber*) moves from what Bakhtin individuate as the 'Romantic grotesque' deprived of the exorcising force of laughter until the regenerative power of boundary-breaker of the 'Rabelaisian grotesque', triumphing with the winged-monstrosity of Sophie Fevvers in *Nights at the Circus*, passing through the mid-desert of the Monstrous Mother of Beulah and the Butlerian drag queen from *The Passion of New Eve*.

3.2 The “never-never world of the happy ever after”:⁴⁶⁴ Bodily metamorphoses and female monstrosity in a selection of Angela Carter’s stories

In this section I will further analyse the role of female monstrosity in selected short stories from Angela Carter's repertoire. I will demonstrate how their representation offers us elements of investigation on Carter's postmodern and revisionist usage of the literary tradition according to these monstrous figures of alterity, hypersexuality and resistance. In particular, it is important to notice how Carter's attention to the Gothic and horror female and beastly monster can be mainly individuated in her first two short story collections, *Fireworks* (1974) and *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), although, as we will see, it is possible to find other declinations of female fetishistic and orientalist otherness in the eponymous *Black Venus*, published in 1985, mentioned in the first section of this chapter (3.1.1), or the murderous stigmatised figure of Lizzie Borden described in *The Fall River Axe Murders* (*Black Venus*, 1985) and *Lizzie's Tiger* (*American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*, 1993). Furthermore, the elements of the monstrous

⁴⁶³ Ivi, p. 96

⁴⁶⁴ Lucie Armitt, “The fragile frames of *The Bloody Chamber*”, in *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, p.89

female's space will be reapplied not only, as we will see, in *The Lady of the House of Love*, but also in the haunted house from the uncollected story *The Snow Pavilion*.⁴⁶⁵

In *Fireworks: Nine Prophane Pieces*, published in 1974, Carter brings together her two-year experience as a correspondence journalist in Japan, capturing the loneliness and adaptation process of a Western woman moving to the Orient (after Carter's divorce in 1972 from her first husband, Paul Carter, of whom she will keep the surname, born as Angela Olive Stalker). Her opening story, *A Souvenir from Japan*, perfectly describes Carter's tormented relationship with an absent lover and her enthusiast attendance of a fireworks festival in Shinkuku ("Above our heads, the fireworks hung dissolving earrings on the night").

In *Fireworks*, Carter does not limit herself to showing only the Western adaptation to Japanese culture, as when in *The Smile of Winter* she writes: «In this country you do not need to think, but only to cook, and soon you think you understand everything», but she also tells of the Japanese customs, Tokyo's love hotels, and the melancholy of this town, all while charging these scenarios with that Gothic and decadent allure that will be fully satisfied in her following collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, and that is echoed here in *The Executioner's Beautiful Daughter*, while evoking the medieval, dark, European settings later explored in her stories. This very allure is also found in *The Loves of Lady Purple*, where Carter fully enacts her dismantling role of 'cultural saboteur' that Sarah Gamble assigns her, while politically playing with the monstrous and Gothic figuration of the *femme fatale* as a puppet in a Kabuki-like drama, and grotesquely animating and converting her into a blood-thirsty murderer of men. In her afterword to *Fireworks*, Carter clarifies her idea of difference between the short story and the tale, validating Britzolakis' assertion that «If there is a single theme that appears central to criticism of Carter's writing, that theme must be theatricality»⁴⁶⁶, as the tale, for Carter, does not aim to imitate life, but rather, to

⁴⁶⁵ see A.Kérchy, "Psychogeography in the curiosity cabinet. Angela Carter's poetics of space", in Mulvey-Roberts, Marie, *The arts of Angela Carter: A cabinet of curiosities*. Manchester University Press, 2019.

⁴⁶⁶ Broughton, Trev Lynn, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.43

see life as a performance. This, in a certain sense, completely justifies both Carter's mannerist purple prose and her imagery populated by monsters and hyperbolic figurations:

The limited trajectory of the short narrative concentrates its meaning. Sign and sense can fuse to an extent impossible to achieve among the multiplying ambiguities of an extended narrative. I found that, though the play of surfaces never ceased to fascinate me, I was not so much exploring them as making abstractions from them, I was writing, therefore, tales.

[...]

The tale does not log everyday experience, as the short story does; it interprets everyday experience through a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience, and therefore the tale cannot betray its readers into a false knowledge of everyday experience. [...] Its style will tend to be ornate, unnatural—and thus operate against the perennial human desire to believe the word as fact. Its only humour is black humour. It retains a singular moral function—that of provoking unease.⁴⁶⁷

Linden Peach encounters a parallelism between Carter's use of theatricality and Bertold Brecht's 'epic theatre' that Carter englobes in her artificiality and uses to amplify her effect of alienation through narration. Further, the Japanese theatre influenced Carter's imagination and style just as the Chinese traditional opera influenced Brecht's theories. The use of artificiality in *Fireworks* is not only an echo of gender as performance, as we will see in *The Loves of Lady Purple*, but also an example of her theatrical usage of the body. The entire collection of tales is crossed by the use of *tableaux vivants* and artificial landscapes, such as the mountains in *The Loves of Lady Purple* which are «sprout jags as sharp and unnatural as those a child outlines with his crayon»⁴⁶⁸, or the waves from *The Smile of Winter*⁴⁶⁹ described as «mould[ing] the foreshore into [...] curvilinear tumulilike the sculptures of Arp».⁴⁷⁰ Therefore, the description of landscapes through a pictorial language further supports the idea of natural landscapes as artefacts as well.

In *Flesh and the Mirror*, Carter's theatrical illusion exercised throughout her tales is revealed by the main character's introspective reflection about the distance that elapses between reality and artificiality: «So I attempted to rebuild the city according to the blueprint in my imagination as a backdrop to the plays in

⁴⁶⁷ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.459

⁴⁶⁸ Ivi, p.41

⁴⁶⁹ Ivi, p.55

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

my puppet theatre, but it sternly refused to be so rebuilt; I was only imagining it had been so rebuilt.»⁴⁷¹ This Carterian reference to characters as puppets in a theatrical scenario perfectly matches Sandra Mills' definition of the puppet as an archetype of the Gothic body and abhumanity, quoting Kelly Hurley's notion of abhuman as a «not-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other».⁴⁷² In fact, if artificiality is a technique used to generate a sense of alienation, it is also useful to see the character-puppet as an Other from Self. Therefore, as Mills comments, «[a]s part object, part being, a distortion of the norm which disrupts categorisation, it exists in-between states. Puppets replicate the human aesthetic, yet their expressions are frequently fixed and they are unable to move without human operation.»⁴⁷³ This, according to Mills, may have led Carter to create narratives which transgress borders of corporeality, bringing to life an inanimate being, a toy, made of inorganic/inanimate material. An example of this is the Frankenstein's Creature, made of corpses' flesh, who becomes abject to Victor as soon as he takes his first breath of life, because what Victor is afraid of, just like the Master Puppeteer, is lack of control over another subaltern objectified-subject, the risk of their autonomy in crossing the borders that define the victim from the trickster.

The muteness of the subaltern puppet/objectified woman, as for Jeanne Duval and her master-lover Baudelaire, or for the Snow Child and her rapist-Count, not only relegates the female monster into submission, but it also evokes Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, written in 1985. Here, the postcolonial Indian philosopher, reflecting on the condition of the Sutte, the Indian widows who sacrificed themselves on a pyre where their dead husbands were put to be cremated, discussed the ventriloquising of the subaltern voice and their desires and demands by their colonising Western 'saviors'. Of course, Spivak's considerations are not limited to women, but she also states that

⁴⁷¹ Ivi, p.69

⁴⁷² Hurley, Kelly, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the fin de siècle*. Vol. 8. Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 4

⁴⁷³ Ibid.

«the question of 'woman' seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways.»⁴⁷⁴

Nevertheless, the female subaltern monsters from Carter's *Fireworks*, like the Suttee from Spivak's essay, reject in a problematic way their silenced role and limited agency, becoming examples of a «subalternity that has no possibility to escape the systemic recursiveness imposed by patriarchal codifications.»⁴⁷⁵ Both Lady Purple and the Lady of the House of Love are enslaved in a cyclical performance⁴⁷⁶ which defines them as monstrous sexual creatures, and even their final rebellion against their roles as deadly *femmes fatales* evidences a critique by Carter towards stereotypes of femininity, beauty and female eroticism. They are both entrapped in a fetishism of female beauty: Lady Purple is a marionette whose story is literally ventriloquised (as the Suttee) by her master; the vampire-Sleeping beauty from the House of Love, instead, is embodying a simulacrum of beauty throughout her cadaveric yet eternally beautiful appearance, emerging as perfect only on the surface. However, she is, in fact, described as «unnatural; her beauty is an abnormality, a deformity, for none of her features exhibit any of those touching imperfections that reconcile us to the imperfections of the human condition. Her beauty is a symptom of her disorder, of her soullessness.»⁴⁷⁷

Conversely, this silencing pattern of subalternity is broken, or at least , as we will see, in Carter's tales from *The Bloody Chamber*, as noticed also by Salman Rushdie in his preface to *Burning your Boats*, Angela Carter's posthumously published complete collection of short stories:

⁴⁷⁴ Williams, Patrick, and Laura Chrisman, *Colonial discourse and post-colonial theory: A reader*. Routledge, 2015., p.90

⁴⁷⁵ Di Maio, Cristina, "Playing the Female Fool: Metamorphoses of the Fool from Fireworks to The Bloody Chamber." *Altre Modernità: Rivista di studi letterari e culturali*, 24, 2020, pp. 346-361., p.352

⁴⁷⁶ As Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas explains in his article on *The Lady of the House of Love*, she becomes a parallel image for her caged bird: "the reader seems to find no escape for her: she is as caged as her pet lark". In Rodríguez-Salas, Gerardo. "Femininity and vampirism as a close circuit: "The Lady of the House of Love" by Angela Carter.", *Sites of female terror: en torno a la mujer y el terror*. Aranzadi Thomson Reuters, 2008., p. 6[123]

⁴⁷⁷ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.69

[Lady Purple] is a female, sexy and lethal rewrite of *Pinocchio*, and, along with the metamorphic cat-woman in "Master" [another tale from *Fireworks*], one of the many dark (and fair) ladies with "unappeasable appetites" to whom Angela Carter is so partial. In her second collection, *The Bloody Chamber*, these riot ladies inherit her fictional earth.⁴⁷⁸

The closed circuit of female hypersexualised beautiful monstrosity is, evidently, a way of entrapping the monstrous female in a repeating pattern. While Lady Purple is a prostitute turned into a doll turned into a revenant blood-thirsty *femme fatale*, the Lady of the House of Love inherits her ancestors' vampiric monstrosity, and she cannot avoid being her father's heir ("*Nosferatu*", meaning that she is, likely, Count Dracula's daughter) and perform her family gift, being a beautiful monster and "a ventriloquist's doll"⁴⁷⁹. As evidenced by Maggie Tonkin, both in *The Loves of Lady Purple* and *The Magic Toyshop*, Carter's second novel (1963), the author refers to puppets as marionette. These puppets are described by McCormick in *The Victorian Marionette Theatre* as «jointed figure[s] operated from above by rods, wires and strings»⁴⁸⁰, indicating the hierarchical physical position of the master puppeteer (above the marionette while moving her wires) and the submission and infantilisation of the marionette, which is under her master. Furthermore, Tonkin demonstrates the etymological derivation of the term 'marionette' from the French 'little Mary', as the Virgin Mary figured as a character in religious puppet plays.⁴⁸¹ In Carter, the marionette acquires a blasphemous and transgressive role of subversion, both of sexuality and femininity, as evident in *The Loves of Lady Purple*. Even Paulina Palmer recognises that in Carter's first works, she tended to depict 'femininity as entrapment' and to represent «woman as a puppet, performing scripts assigned to her by a male-supremacist culture»⁴⁸²

⁴⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 7

⁴⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 204

⁴⁸⁰ McCormick, John, *The Victorian Marionette Theatre*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004. p. ix

⁴⁸¹ Baird, Bill, *The Art of the Puppet*, Ridge Press/Macmillan, New York, 1965, p.67

⁴⁸² *The infernal desire machines of Dr. Hoffmann* (1972) introduces the surreal image of the mutant prostitutes, part woman, part vegetable, providing entertainment for men and furnishing a spectacle for the male gaze. In *The Magic Toyshop*, the protagonist Melanie becomes, metaphorically speaking, another puppet for her uncle to manipulate and control. The roles she performs at his instigation include the conventionally feminine ones of wood nymph, bride and (the reverse side of the coin to these romantic, decorative personae) victim of rape». (Paulina

In a 2017 interview of Natsumi Ikoma with Sozo Araki, Carter's Japanese lover at the time of her stay in Japan as described in *Fireworks*, Araki reveals Carter's interest in the Japanese theatrical representations, and in particular for the Kabuki and Bunraku theatre, a marionette show in which «an extremely elegant and stylised femininity is put on show by a male actor in the former or by a puppet in the latter, further consolidating the fact that 'femininity' is a performance».⁴⁸³

I would argue that in *Lady Purple*, due to the dichotomic relationship between Master and slave and their narrative interchangeability based on power that occurs both in Japanese theatre and in the characters from Carter's story, Lady Purple not only enacts a performance, but she also iconises the male-master's fetishistic objectification of her sexuality through the embedded play that he has conceived for her and for the show of which she is the protagonist.

The Loves of Lady Purple, thus, operates on two narrative levels: the first is the frame-story of the Asiatic Professor and his touring company of the Bunraku theatre; the second, embedded level is the story played by his marionette, Lady Purple, the star of his show, for whom he has written her tale of lust and sinful perdition that led her to be cursed and entrapped in a marionette's body due to the crimes she committed in life, as a blood-thirsty prostitute. From the beginning of the story, Carter situates the characters within a grotesque and freakish scenario, based on the relationship which elapses between the attraction (the freakshow people) and the spectators, who visit the space of otherness and pay for their visit: «A universal cast of two-headed dogs, dwarfs, alligator men, bearded ladies and giants in leopard-skin loin cloths reveal their singularities in the sideshows and, wherever they come from, they share the sullen glamour of deformity, an internationality which acknowledges no geographic boundaries. Here, the grotesque is the order of the day.»⁴⁸⁴ The Asiatic Professor, a 'virtuoso of puppetry' whose function is being the «intermediary between us, his audience,

Palmer in Bristow, Joseph, and Trev Lynn Broughton. *The infernal desires of Angela Carter: fiction, femininity, feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p. 31

⁴⁸³ Ikoma, Natsumi, "Encounter with the mirror of the other: Angela Carter and her personal connection with japan." *Angelaki* 22.1, 2017, pp. 77-92., p.86

⁴⁸⁴ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016., p.49

the living, and they, the dolls, the undead»⁴⁸⁵ is said to channel his own sexual passions through his marionette, Lady Purple («a medium other than himself»)⁴⁸⁶. This passage makes clear, then, how Lady Purple satisfies both her creator's scripted fantasies and her voyeuristic audience that came to enjoy her story of pleasure and condemnation. Her undead eternal beauty makes her an object of terror and male sexual contemplation until when she does not break her cyclical scheme of ventriloquism and her identity of «*femme fatale* (...) manipulated by the strings of male pornographic adulation, dramatised in her every move».⁴⁸⁷

Therefore, Carter introduces Lady purple while describing the doll as an ἔκφρασις⁴⁸⁸ that crystallises her wicked beauty in her artificial, abhuman body. Every part of her body is put in evidence as an artifice, a mockery, of femininity, beauty, male fetishism, and the ferocity attributed to her by the Professor:

She was the Queen of Night. There were glass rubies in her head for eyes and her ferocious teeth, carved out of mother o' pearl, were always on show for she had a permanent smile. Her face was as white as chalk because it was covered with the skin of supplest white leather which also clothed her torso, jointed limbs and complication of extremities. Her beautiful hands seemed more like weapons because her nails were so long, five inches of pointed tin enamelled scarlet, and she wore a wig of black hair arranged in a chignon more heavily elaborate than any human neck could have endured. This monumental chevelure was stuck through with many brilliant pins tipped with pieces of broken mirror so that, every time she moved, she cast a multitude of scintillating reflections which danced about the theatre like mice of light. Her clothes were all of deep, dark, slumbrous colours—profound pinks, crimson and the vibrating purple with which she was synonymous, a purple the colour of blood in a love suicide.⁴⁸⁹

This abject female Gothic figure, then, has embodied so many physical elements of ferocity and beauty that she is both an object of disgust and fascination, and her abject body is able to interact with the male audience only by means of a

⁴⁸⁵ Ivi, p.47

⁴⁸⁶ Ivi, p.49

⁴⁸⁷ Munford, Rebecca, ed. *Re-visiting Angela Carter: texts, contexts, intertexts*. Springer, 2006., p.185

⁴⁸⁸ From the Oxford Classic Dictionary: «Ekphrasis refers to the literary and rhetorical trope of summoning up—through words—an impression of a visual stimulus, object, or scene. As critical trope, the word *ekphrasis* (ἔκφρασις) is attested from the first century CE onwards: it is discussed in the Imperial Greek *Progymnasmata*, where it is defined as a “descriptive speech which brings the subject shown before the eyes with visual vividness.” »

⁴⁸⁹ Munford, Rebecca, ed. *Re-visiting Angela Carter: texts, contexts, intertexts*. Springer, 2006., p.185

male agency. As Wisker evidences, Lady Purple «fills the silences of the men who manipulate her limbs, while she herself is literally voiceless.»⁴⁹⁰

Therefore, the Asiatic Professor modulates his voice in order to dub Lady Purple's one («a thick, lascivious murmur like fur soaked in honey which sent unwilling shudders of pleasure down the spines of the watchers»), and while moving his doll prepares the narration of her misdeeds, announced by the catchpenny title of the play, 'The Notorious Amours of Lady Purple, the Shameless Oriental Venus', the story of the «petrification of a universal whore»⁴⁹¹. Her story is the *cursus honorum* of an evil and perverse prostitute, a 'siren' and 'corrupted phoenix' who, after seducing her stepfather and murdering him and his wife, burned down her own home⁴⁹² and left to take part as a prostitute in the 'most important brothel' in the city. This place, a heterotopian space of otherness, is the nerve center for any male perversion, a blank zone made of «halls of mirrors, [...] flagellation parlours, [...] cabarets of nature-defying copulations and the ambiguous soirees held by men-women and female men” and where 'flesh' is said to be “the specialty of every house”»⁴⁹³

Lady Purple, within this favourable setting where she can freely play with her malice, suddenly becomes «mistress of the whip before her fifteenth birthday»⁴⁹⁴, humiliating and subduing her rich lovers. At the height of her career, she has become a «no malleable, (...) frigid substance upon which desires might be executed; she was not a true prostitute for she was the object on which men prostituted themselves.»⁴⁹⁵ Soon, she also becomes a serial killer who murders her lovers for pleasure, the perfect image of “irresistible evil”.⁴⁹⁶ It is interesting, then, the metaphor Carter uses to describe Lady Purple's exercise of power over men, comparing her to a devastating plague, a sign that

⁴⁹⁰ Broughton, Trev Lynn, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.129

⁴⁹¹ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.51

⁴⁹² Notice here the analogy with the Frankenstein's Creature act of burning the DeLacey's house in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). I would interpret the act of burning a houseplace by the monstrous figure as the ultimate refusal of being part of the normative society and at the same time the acceptance of the condition of monstrosity, and therefore the acknowledgement of having to look for a space to occupy that resides outside the normative spaces of society.

⁴⁹³ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.50

⁴⁹⁴ Ivi, p.53

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Ivi, p.54

a repressed, feminine is the expression of male fears of annihilation. While for Victor Frankenstein it was the fear of the 'hideous progeny' and for Lionel Verney the devastating Plague that caused him to become the Last Man, here it is lust and femininity that become the performative means for the revenge of the monster/abject against the male subject that has a/objectified her: «She visited men like a Plague, both bane and terrible enlightenment, and she was as contagious as the plague.»⁴⁹⁷ Her good fortune lasts until even she herself is affected by her own evil, becoming even «more ghastly than those she had infected» and ending up having to work in the streets, obliterated and cast out with stones by those who once adulated her. After begging for ages and surviving using macabre escamotages, like selling the hair of the bloated corpses of those who have committed suicide at the nearby seaside, she «abrogated her humanity. She became nothing but wood and hair. She became a marionette herself, herself her own replica, the dead yet moving image of the shameless Oriental Venus».⁴⁹⁸

After the embedded plotline, the show ends and the Asiatic Professor is ready to hang his doll again until the next night's show. As Wisker observes, he hides her away «out of sight for future use.» Maggie Tonkin, instead, suggests that this cyclical repetition of Lady Purple's show indicates that Carter aimed also to allude to specifically Western forms of male public shows, such as the peepshow, that she will use again in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffmann*, while introducing the surreal image of the mutant prostitutes, “part woman, part vegetable”,⁴⁹⁹ that provide entertainment for the masculine gaze. The sexual objectification of women is also presented in Carter's description of the brothel's street, where Lady Purple works, and where prostitutes are called “the mannequins of desire” and locked in wicker cages so that customers can select them. However, differently from on other nights, the Asiatic Professor decides not to hang Lady Purple on her hooks and to sleep with her. He kisses her and notices that Lady Purple has turned her wooden face into warm flesh: «Yet, in spite of the Professor's sad humility, his chapped and withered mouth

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁸ Ivi, p.55

⁴⁹⁹ A conventional representation of grotesque in art is the hybridisation of human elements with plants, see Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*, quoted in Chapter 1

opened on hot, wet, palpitating flesh. The sleeping wood had wakened.»⁵⁰⁰ She is now a hybrid being in metamorphosis turned into flesh from her artificial material, and as a human automaton, the revenant vampiric Lady Purple bites the Professor on his neck and drinks his blood: «She sank her teeth into his throat and drained him. He did not have the time to make a sound».⁵⁰¹

In this ferocious and automatic gesture, she has done nothing but apply the story that she was destined to enact as a doll, and even her kiss, in response to the Professor's kiss, «emanated from the dark country where desire is objectified and lives».⁵⁰² In other terms, Lady Purple has become the living expression of the masculine narration of the *femme fatale*, who applies the male fears and the male fetish that fantasises on female figuration of Gothic monstrosity, and an automaton that executes gestures as a pre-determined instinctuality. In fact, while we may be induced to think that Lady Purple is now free from her master and can now choose her own destiny, her condition of performing actress forced to play a role over and extends even to her consciousness as a living creature. That is, she is unable to distinguish the living from the marionette:

...she could not escape the tautological paradox in which she was trapped; had the marionette all the time parodied the living or was she, now living, to parody her own performance as a marionette? Although she was now manifestly a woman, young and beautiful, the leprous whiteness of her face gave her the appearance of a corpse animated solely by demonic will.⁵⁰³

As Gina Wisker states, although she is newly born, Lady Purple is trapped in her role, based on «the professor's script as a deadly whore»⁵⁰⁴, and locked into what Sarah Gamble describes as 'a savage cycle of endless replication and self-destruction'.⁵⁰⁵ She embodies, then, «the vengeful fears of the vampiric *femme fatale* just as the patriarchy's necrophilic desire to make women into inanimate

⁵⁰⁰ Ivi, p.57

⁵⁰¹ Ivi, p.58

⁵⁰² Ibid.

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ Munford, Rebecca, ed. *Re-visiting Angela Carter: texts, contexts, intertexts*. Springer, 2006., p.185

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid.

dolls»⁵⁰⁶. Therefore, as an automaton, she recognises that her role is to burn down the puppeteer and his stand and leave the luna park to reach the nearest brothel in town. In this way, Lady Purple is re-enacting her Master's plotline script: «She walked rapidly past the silent roundabouts, accompanied only by the fluctuating mists, towards the town, making her way like a homing pigeon, out of logical necessity, to the single brothel it contained.»⁵⁰⁷ Interestingly, however, Maggie Tonkin notes how the marionette acquires, in theatre, the function of the ideal model of performance, since their «lack of interiority makes them ideal models for abstract, stylised modes of performance,» eliciting the audience to take distance and feel estrangement before the action played by the marionette. In Carter's universe, where puppets encode the Freudian uncanny according to which uncanny is «everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden»⁵⁰⁸, the choice behind Lady Purple's return to the brothel is evident. She can only choose the fate she recognises as being available for her, a monstrous, sexual, blood-thirsty mistress, whose choice is nothing but a socially constrained illusion of the monstrous female who walks to reach her space of otherness that enacts her cyclical destiny of death and metamorphosis. For Tonkin, Carter has applied Lady Purple's character the Brechtian alienation device to describe the marionette's absence of interiority and the determinism of her whore-destiny. In this way, Carter makes the reader part of the alienating feeling associated with the doll's action:

Carter's choice of a marionette to illustrate her theme is predicated on its complete absence of emotional life or interiority (...) the corollary of which is a lack of audience identification. Like Brecht, Carter is here using the absence of characterization in order to provoke alienation so as to 'shock us into bringing the best of our reason into play' (Brook: 2008, 81), rather than appealing to the affective response of the reader.⁵⁰⁹

⁵⁰⁶ Broughton, Trev Lynn, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.130

⁵⁰⁷ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.59

⁵⁰⁸ Freud, Sigmund ([1919] 1953–74), 'The Uncanny' (1919), James Strachey (ed.), in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 17 (1917–19) (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis), pp. 217–56.

⁵⁰⁹ Mulvey-Roberts, Marie, *The arts of Angela Carter: A cabinet of curiosities*. Manchester University Press, 2019.

Upon reaching the brothel, Lady Purple is implicitly satisfying her male audience's expectations of her role, which she is playing without consciousness and only by following her superficial characterisation.

However, she clearly opens the pathway to the other female monsters from Carter's later narratives, as her story is in fact a critique of a status quo that condemns her to not escape from her role, and also because she is the catalyst of the female grotesque theorised by Russo; Lady Purple, just like Fevvers from *Nights at the Circus*, is a figuration of Russo's «female transgressor as public spectacle» that constitutes «a demystifying or utopian model» of excess and transgression of male fantasies.⁵¹⁰ The male fantasy of the female seductress' performance and her following punishment as a de-humanised monster enacts, for Wisker, Kristeva's abjection, and evokes the male-Gothic tendency to objectify female figures as necrophiliac fantasies. Wisker claims that Edgar Allan Poe does so in his tales, like in *Ligeia*, through «an undead woman whose eternal longevity is both sexualised and controlled»,⁵¹¹ by the narrator's crystallising process of turning his undead wife into an ideal of ethereal undead beauty that validates both Irigaray's observation on the masculine fantasy of women as the otherness representing death⁵¹² and the implicit idea of passivity related to women that this image of the undead-beauty brings to mind.

In his study on the 'subject of Men' in Carter's works, Paul Magrs classifies the vampire-lady from *The Lady of the House of Love* as a passive object of seduction by a male character. As the tale is a rewriting of *La Belle au-Bois Dormant*, a Perraultian version of the Sleeping Beauty motif, the play Carter enacts between the passive-sleeping beauty (here a vampiress) and the active, male hero that has come to save her is evident as well as it is clear the allusion to the female Gothic novel where the maiden is victim of a male invasion in the castle that becomes a metaphor for her body. (see Chapter 1).

⁵¹⁰ Russo, Mary. *The female grotesque: risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge, 2012., p.60

⁵¹¹ Mulvey-Roberts, Marie. *The arts of Angela Carter: A cabinet of curiosities*. Manchester University Press, 2019

⁵¹² Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the other woman*. Cornell University Press, 1985.

However, Magrs notes that beauty, especially if eternal, has in Carter's work a de-mythologising and subversive function: «When we encounter absolute beauty in Carter's writing, it is always sinister. It is the waxy, perfect face of the fully enslaved doll or puppet (Lady Purple). These puppets have features which show none of the stresses or rents which betray experience, of a struggle towards liberation. They are smoothed beneath the pressure of somebody's thumb.»⁵¹³ Thus, again, Magrs recalls how this female passivity and objectification is functional into showing the male attempt of being 'conscious seducers' while adopting the female object of phallogocentric desire as a statue to be moulded, which I would suggest to consider as a reactualisation of Galatea-Pygmalion's myth. Not by chance, in her essay, Andrea Dworkin described in *Woman Hating* how the female character was a 'good' one, related to passivity and beauty, while a bad woman was described as such because she was an active character. Dworkin's theory is that, within patriarchal imagery, «happiness for a woman is to be passive, victimised, destroyed or asleep».⁵¹⁴

All these considerations of femininity converge, in Carter's *Lady of the House of Love*, in the author's conjugation of female monstrosity with the *femme fatale* as female predator of men, while it incorporates the Kristevan abject, the male Freudian fear of death as uncanny, together with the literary and cultural tradition of the female seductress-vampire as «terrifying and seductive».⁵¹⁵ I would like to specify that both Lady Purple and the Lady of the House of Love are female vampires, although here the hierarchy of power is inverted. While in Lady Purple the marionette is enslaved by her master, the Asiatic Professor, and then frees herself by becoming a vampire, in *The Lady of the House of Love* there is a male victim who enters the vampire's house, and here again Carter plays with the conventional dichotomy of passive-active character as well as with the victim-executioner binary.⁵¹⁶ Cannibalistic sexuality, together with the dynamics of

⁵¹³ Broughton, Trev Lynn, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.190

⁵¹⁴ Dworkin, Andrea. *Woman hating*, Dutton, New York, 1974, p.49

⁵¹⁵ Creed, Barbara. *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 2015, p.66

⁵¹⁶ Broughton, Trev Lynn, *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter: Fiction, Femininity, Feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.190

power within *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) are problematised by Margaret Atwood in her essay *Running with Wolves*, stating that «Carter [...] celebrates relativity and metamorphosis» and suggesting that there is a constant interchangeability between gender roles and the condition of being tiger or lamb (meaning predator or prey).⁵¹⁷ The other common element between Lady Purple and the Lady of the House of Love is their conditions of being closed circuits, as both are destined to apply their nature of monstrous females, the former because of her scripted part, the latter because of her immortal inheritance of being a vampire's daughter. They are both grotesque examples of «freakishly (re)incarnated bod[ies] generating [their] subversively somatised narratives.»⁵¹⁸ The abjection derived from the Nosferatu-Lady figure and her surrounding environment clearly evokes death joined with beauty and the rotting decadence of dead bodies. The land itself where the countless lives is repeatedly described as a reign governed by shadows and as 'the place of annihilation' for those who trespass on it. Within this setting, the image of the female vampire depicted as a bird-of-prey⁵¹⁹ waiting in the shadows for her male victims to come validates and embodies those attributes that Barbara Creed assigns to the female vampire, and which label her as a female monster and epitome of female abjection. The female vampire, Creed states,

disrupts identity and order; driven by her lust for blood, she does not respect the dictates of the law which set down the rules of proper sexual conduct. Like the male, the female vampire also represents abjection because she crosses the boundary between the living and dead, the human and animal. The vampire's animalism is made explicit in her bloodlust and the growth of her two pointed fangs. Because she is not completely animal or human, because she hovers on the boundary between these two states, she represents abjection.⁵²⁰

Furthermore, this definition of abjection by Creed perfectly fits with all the monstrous in-between female characters in Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, or, I should say, in all of Carter's literary production, as we will also see in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984). However, the female

⁵¹⁷ Carter, Angela, "Flesh and the Mirror." *Fireworks.*, Virago, London, 2006, pp.137-38

⁵¹⁸ Kérchy, Anna, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic Point of View.* Edwin Mellen Press, 2008, p.32

⁵¹⁹ Carter, Angela, "Flesh and the Mirror." *Fireworks*, Virago, London, 2006, pp.137-38

⁵²⁰ Creed, Barbara. *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis.* Routledge, 2015, p.61

monsters in Carter's works are in-process creatures, as their identities are, and their evolution can involve either a physical change, like in *The Snow Child* or *The Tiger's Bride*, or a change of subjectivity through a growing-up process, as occurs to the passive female subject of the eponymous tale of *The Bloody Chamber*. In the specific case of the female vampire monster, her abjection is reiterated by her connection with bodily fluids, in particular with blood, included by Kristeva in the abject-category of "bodily waists".⁵²¹

Blood, if related to a female vampire, is not only an edible fluid, but also related with menstruation, which according to Kristeva locates the woman in a liminal status that makes her «at the threshold of womanhood»⁵²² because of her «female power associated with bodily change.»⁵²³ Not by chance, in *The Lady of the House of Love*, the cyclical scheme of Beauty's imprisonment in her prey-victim scheme is broken once she hurts herself and loses blood, which will be the only remaining trace of her presence. Seduction, blood as a female element of abjection and masculine fears of becoming a victim or, to use a Freudian expression, to be castrated by the female monster, are epitomised by the symbol of the rose, conventionally associated, in courtly love literature, with a female object of beauty to conquer (e.g. *Le Roman de la Rose*), and which is here a symbol of the Lady-Nosferatu's awakening from her objectified, undead condition, as she takes the rose from between her legs, clearly associating the rose with female menstrual blood, and giving it to the male visitor. The vampiress' condition of resisting and metamorphic, bleeding body contrasts with her dead body state of exoskeleton of a young woman. This fear of her female sexual awakening is due to a patriarchal idea of desire and pleasure which are traditionally reduced to the male function. This perversion linked to the female bleeding predator evokes and epitomises Elizabeth Grosz' description of the 'vagina dentata':⁵²⁴

The fantasy of the vagina dentata , of the non-human status of woman as android, vampire or animal, the identification of female sexuality as voracious, insatiable, enigmatic, invisible and unknowable, cold, calculating, instrumental,

⁵²¹ Ivi, p.9

⁵²² Creed, Barbara. "Horror and the Carnavalesque." *Fields of Vision*. University of California Press, 1995. 127-159., p.130

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Grosz, Elizabeth, and Elspeth Probyn. *Sexy bodies: The strange carnalities of feminism*. Psychology Press, 1995.

castrator/decapitator of the male, dissimulatress or fake, predatory, engulfing mother, preying on male weakness, are all consequences of the ways in which male orgasm has functioned as the measure and representative of all sexualities and all modes of erotic encounter.⁵²⁵

In fact, in *The Lady of the House of Love*, the vampiric voracity of the female monster is epitomised by the young male's attention for the Lady's mouth that disturbs him, almost repels him: «her extraordinarily fleshy mouth, a mouth with wide, full, prominent lips of a vibrant purplish-crimson, a morbid mouth.»⁵²⁶ Not by chance, he concludes that it almost looks to him as “a whore's mouth”.⁵²⁷

Furthermore, the male fantasies related to imagining a female corpse to possess are alluded to by Carter when she mentions that the male hero received a suggestion from by his colonel to visit a Paris brothel where he could have sex with a naked girl sleeping in a coffin and pretending to be dead, to satisfy a masculine «necrophiliac pleasure of a pretended corpse.»⁵²⁸ The female protagonist is introduced as already being an abject monster within an abject territory, where the human inhabitants have left and surrendered to leave it in control of the dark forces that govern it. Thus, hers is as cyclical a universe as the one to which Lady Purple is condemned: she waits in her castle for her old servant to bring her a young man to slash and feed off of, as she is the daughter of Nosferatu. Even her tarot cards, which she interprets every day, constantly give her the same response, condemning her to be «both death and the maiden.»⁵²⁹

Gerardo Rodriguez-Salas suggests that this routine indicates a pre-destination according to which women are functional to a phallogocentric imagery, as in the case of the *femme fatale*, in order to «show that women's fate in patriarchy is pre-set, a "closed circuit"⁵³⁰ (195), like the "inevitable Tarot" that

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.240

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.246

⁵²⁹ Ivi, p.232

⁵³⁰ Rodríguez-Salas, Gerardo. "Femininity and vampirism as a close circuit: "The Lady of the House of Love" by Angela Carter.", *Sites of female terror: en torno a la mujer y el terror*. Aranzadi Thomson Reuters, 2008, p.3[123]

always shows the same configuration for the protagonist: wisdom, death and dissolution.»⁵³¹

Her beauty, again, is the symptom of her unnatural condition of in-between (life and death) monstress, as «she is so beautiful she is unnatural; her beauty is an abnormality, a deformity, for none of her features exhibit any of those touching imperfections (...) of the human condition». Her beauty is a symptom of her soullessness, and her house also reflects her rotting process of undead being: there is decadence and disintegration all around, «[d]epressions of rot and fungus everywhere» that she does not even notice, as it is part of that process of decadence. In this regard, Carter makes explicit the Lady's condition of monstrous being set within into a monstrous, Gothic setting, her house in the woods; she is a haunted house.

She herself is a haunted house. She does not possess herself; her ancestors sometimes come and peer out of the windows of her eyes and that is very frightening. She has the mysterious solitude of ambiguous states; she hovers in a no-man's land between life and death, sleeping and waking, behind the hedge of spiked flowers, Nosferatu's sanguinary rosebud. The beastly forebears on the walls condemn her to a perpetual repetition of their passions.⁵³²

She reflects through a constant interchangeability of symbolic images her connection with her house, which acts as an extension of her corporeality: a decadent beauty in a decadent, aristocratic space. Lucie Armitz describes this Carterian device as “the fantasy formula for the world to become flesh,” and claims that the Lady of the House of Love is not only 'a haunted house', but also 'a bloody chamber', due to her voracious, murderous actions. I would argue that she is an 'anti-bloody chamber', because while the bloody chamber serves as a space for misogynistic, murderous purposes which serve to reaffirm patriarchal violence, here the female vampire becomes an executioner rather than a victim, while re-actualising the role play between genders in Carter's narrative.¹ Her bird, a lark that she keeps in a cage, is the symbol of a desired freedom that is never reached, but which is also the expression of her wish for a (human) lover, as the 'lark' is the bird evoked in William Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* during

⁵³¹ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.244

⁵³² Ibid.

Romeo's farewell to Juliet, mentioned in the tale. As she herself recognises, she is indeed a killer, and this aspect of her transcends her willingness, as she acts in a hybrid human-animal condition. Describing her hunting ritual, Carter writes:

On moonless nights, her keeper lets her out into the garden. This garden, an exceedingly sombre place, bears a strong resemblance to a burial ground and all the roses her dead mother planted have grown up into a huge, spiked wall that incarcerates her in the castle of her inheritance. When the back door opens, the Countess will sniff the air and howl. She drops, now, on all fours. Crouching, quivering, she catches the scent of her prey. Delicious crunch of the fragile bones of rabbits and small, furry things she pursues with fleet, four-footed speed; she will creep home, whimpering, with blood smeared on her cheeks. She pours water from the ewer in her bedroom into the bowl, she washes her face with the wincing, fastidious gestures of a cat. [...] The Countess wants fresh meat.⁵³³

Interestingly, however, this image of the Countess as a feline, savage, voracious predator is immediately elevated to a powerful idea of immortality and female power: «All claws and teeth, she strikes, she gorges, but nothing can console her for the ghastliness of her condition, nothing. [...] the beautiful somnambulist helplessly perpetuates her ancestral crimes. [...] Everything about this beautiful and ghastly lady is as it should be, queen of night, queen of terror—except her horrible reluctance for the role.»⁵³⁴

However, reluctant or not, her dangerous capabilities are immediately presented to the reader, as she appears as a huntress awaiting her prey. Again, the prey, a young soldier and cyclist travelling in Romania (Transylvania) during a military discharge, comes to play the stereotypical function of the male hero saving the sleeping beauty (or, in this case, the undead vampire-lady) and to twist the roles of victim and executioner. While, in fact, it would be predictable that his fate is being mauled and eaten by the Countess as occurred to all the other men before him, he will be key to her downfall, re-actualising the fable motif of the *Sleeping Beauty*. While she reads her usual tarots, that always announce her «wisdom, death, and dissolution», this time the closed circuit undergoes a variant: «The waxen fingers of the Countess, fingers of a holy image, turn up the card called Les Amoureux. Never, never before. . . never before has the Countess cast

⁵³³ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.235

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

herself a fate involving love.»⁵³⁵ This, according to Atwood, is the Countess's weak point that gives a male the opportunity to take down the female monster, when the Countess shows mercy for a handsome, virgin traveller and ends up undone like Browning's lady of Shalott⁵³⁶ and activates the alternative ending to the closed circuit. The fatal moment that signs the demise of the lady coincides with the young man's projects on his life with her, while he mentally plans how to 'normalise' her monstrosity and how to englobe her in a conventional femininity that would give him the chance and the condition of making her his respectable wife. In other terms, she is passing from being a monstrous prisoner to be an idealised married woman in a patriarchal, subaltern relationship:

Then he padded into the boudoir, his mind busy with plans. We shall take her to Zurich, to a clinic; she will be treated for nervous hysteria. Then to an eye specialist, for her photophobia, and to a dentist, to put her teeth into better shape. Any competent manicurist will deal with her claws. We shall turn her into the lovely girl she is; I shall cure her of all these nightmares.⁵³⁷

The Sleeping Beauty is ventriloquised just as Lady Purple, not only by her ancestors, but also by her 'savior', and her fate is to be reduced to subalternity. Nevertheless, in the meantime, she has to take off her dark glasses that protect her from life if she wants to put on her dress, which is her mother's wedding dress. In doing so, she hurts one of her fingers with a piece of broken glass, just as Sleeping Beauty pricks her finger with the spindle's needle, and for the first time the Countess bleeds. This incident has a disruptive power on her, as it provokes an identity crisis within her. The handsome man, however, acts as a savior, taking care of her by kissing her finger after drying her blood with a handkerchief. As Atwood shows, by drinking her blood, he again subverts the predator-prey roles.⁵³⁸

In this way, what is mocked here is the double performativity of the female monster and the abortive image of Romantic intercourse. The idea of performativity is evoked immediately once the sunlight comes into the Countess's

⁵³⁵ Ivi, p.237

⁵³⁶ Margaret Atwood in Sage, Lorna. "Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter (London: Virago, 1994) and Aidan Day. "Angela Carter: The Rational Glass", 1998, p.11.; p.144.

⁵³⁷ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.248

⁵³⁸ Margaret Atwood in Sage, Lorna. "Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter (London: Virago, 1994) and Aidan Day. "Angela Carter: The Rational Glass", 1998, p.11., p.144

house and the soldier notices the shabbiness of the place, with all its tawdry equipment: «how cheap the satin, the catafalque not ebony at all but black-painted paper stretched on struts of wood, as in the theatre.»⁵³⁹

The spell has been broken, giving way to the young man's skeptical mind's theories.

The female monster is mocked because, with her disappearance and her 'saviour's kiss', she opts for death when faced with the choice of becoming a human («How can she bear the pain of becoming human?»⁵⁴⁰, or remaining a female body-monster linked to female desire and to the fearful power of the vampire. For this reason, the only solution for her is death, extinction, and the only remaining trace of her existence is her blood stain on the man's handkerchief, a simulacrum of her doubtful moment of passage: a crystallisation of her in-between-ness. Not by chance, when the cyclist returns to the war trenches, he notices that the Countess's blood has become a scarlet rose, like the Snow Child from the short story who while dying in the snow left a crow's feather instead of her corpse. «It is the rose of death, and it accompanies the young man to the trenches, in France; a somewhat Gothic ending, after all.»⁵⁴¹

Not only, however, death, but also the symbolic voracity of the female monster who feeds herself on young men; in fact, the rosebushes surrounding the Countess's mansion are full of red roses that take their energy and 'rotting beauty and smell from the sweet corpses of men that rest in the ground, Similarly, the countess's rose given to the soldier is a "monstrous flower" brimming with its "reeling odour"⁵⁴²; that odour symbolises the endurance of the countess's death.

Another centripetal theme of Carter's thought, which is heterogeneically explored in *The Bloody Chamber*, is monstrosity related with becoming-animal, due to the process of metamorphosis that this fusion between the human subject and the animal monster endures. As do the two already mentioned figures of *femmes fatales* and their objectified condition, with the becoming-animal creature

⁵³⁹ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016, p.247

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁴¹ Margaret Atwood in Sage, Lorna. "Flesh and the Mirror: Essays on the Art of Angela Carter (London: Virago, 1994) and Aidan Day. "Angela Carter: The Rational Glass", 1998, p.11., p.144

⁵⁴² Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016, p.249

Carter contests the traditional image of predator and victim, while linking the female beast to an expression of the repressed desires of the category of otherness. There is, in this way, a resisting and carnivalesque power connected with the process of transformation of the hybrid figures populating her stories, according to which the animal-human-monster becomes the figuration for a never-ending carnival of subversion and being that always aims to contest the normative system and the idea of a finite, non-mutable corporeality.

The body of the grotesque monster, instead, as seen in Chapter 1 with Bakhtin's theories, is always changing and always stuck in an irreversible process of modification of the flesh that constitutes that body and also influences also on the body's status of 'body of the subject vs. body of the abject'. For Wendy West, whose point of view I share, there is a tendency by Western culture to associate a human-animal monstrous transformation with a loss of control over the subject's body: «the body is the exclusive property of the subject, the monster [...]'s plot] focuses on the "propriety of the 'body'" being somehow violated». ⁵⁴³ The monstrous animal in Carter overcomes this cultural repetition while associating the physical transformation with a sexual or identitary awakening, like that occurring in *The Company of Wolves*, where Little Red Riding Hood has a sexual intercourse with the wolf, enacting a 'metamorphosis' that destabilises Vladimir Propp's schematic folktale's role related to "the virgin function". According to Swyt, these narrative transformations, or 'becomings', as Deleuze and Guattari define them, suggest a (dis)ordering that destroys the "natural" sublimation of civilised glances and table manners that maintain the binaries of purity/evil, subject/object, and beast/girl. ⁵⁴⁴

The wolf is the perfect animalesque figure to consider as border-creature, due to its intermediate wandering between the village (a space of normativity, symbolising the human community) and the woods (a space of wilderness and mystery, comparable to the Derridean crypt). In their essay *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari distinguish between three types of animals:

⁵⁴³ Swyt, Wendy. "'Wolfings': Angela Carter's becoming-narrative." *Studies in Short Fiction* 33.3, 1996, p. 318.

⁵⁴⁴ Ivi, p.316

1. Oedipal animals each with its own petty history, 'my' cat, 'my' dog.
2. mythic animals with assigned "characteristics" or "attributes"
3. demonic animals, pack or affect animals that for a multiplicity, a becoming, a population, a tale.⁵⁴⁵

The wolf, or rather, the werewolf, belongs to the category of the "demonic animal" and its function is to defy the Self and the Other, threatening, as Bakhtin theorised, the very category of the body. Although, as Anna Pasolini observes, the metamorphoses in *The Bloody Chamber* do not challenge the heterosexual system, they do challenge the patriarchal system that controls the representation of the female body and wishes to crystallise it into a monstrous image which will be functional to his glorification as subject. Thus, the metamorphoses of the bodies can occur in both ways in Carter's tales: from animal to human, as in *The Courtship of Mr. Lyon*, and from human to animal, as in *The Tiger's Bride*, where a woman transforms herself into a tiger, or rather, reveal herself to be a tiger in a woman's performed body. Viceversa, her husband, who hides behind a fake human identity, will freely live as a tiger now that she has become a tiger as well. Her transformation process is described as being full of pain, a symbol of the efforts made by women to free themselves from the meanings inscribed over their corporealities as they free themselves from their human skin, revealing her beastly nature. Reciprocally, once she has freed herself from her constrictive human form, her lover joins her and helps her lick her human skin off from her body:

He dragged himself closer and closer to me, until I felt the harsh velvet of his head against my hand, then a tongue, abrasive as sandpaper. "He will lick the skin off me!" And each stroke of his tongue ripped off skin after successive skin, all the skins of a life in the world, and left behind a nascent patina of shiny hairs. My earrings turned back to water and trickled down my shoulders; I shrugged the drops off my beautiful fur.⁵⁴⁶

As we see, then, there is in this first-person narration a coincidence between the in-becoming corporeality of the female subject and her consciousness, different

⁵⁴⁵ Ivi, p.241

⁵⁴⁶ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016. , p.201

from the Western tendency noticed by Swyt to distinguish between the animal and the human, the latter seen as the only possible sentient subject. This transforms the metamorphosis of the becoming-animal into an empowering practice of peeling off the body's strata of meaning which were prescribed onto it. By doing so, the monstrous female becoming-animal not only acquires a posthuman and anti-anthropocentric value, it also serves to resignify the association of women with beasts and animality (or non-humanity) as well as that between monster and human, in such a way that the renewed idea of subjectivity Carter supports «is not slit along the traditional axes of mind/body, consciousness/unconsciousness, or reason/imagination»⁵⁴⁷, but rather it transforms itself into a «forever shifting entity, fundamentally driven by desire for expansion towards its many-faceted exterior borders/other».⁵⁴⁸

In *Wolf Alice*, it appears this Deleuzian-Carterian integration of human and animal functions, as the main female character is a young girl who has been raised by wolves and who therefore identifies herself with the pack of wolves who has bred her. For this reason, her monstrous transitional process does not give her the possibility of taming her animal nature and adopt it to the new process of humanisation and education that she is being exposed to by the people who try to integrate her in society: her name itself, Wolf-Alice, is a proof of her hybrid existence:

Two-legs looks, four-legs sniffs. Her long nose is always a-quivering, sifting every scent it meets. With this useful tool, she lengthily investigates everything she glimpses. She can net so much more of the world than we can through the fine, hairy sensitive filters of her nostrils that her poor eyesight does not trouble her. Her nose is sharper by night than our eyes are by day so it is the night she prefers, when the cool reflected light of the moon does not make her eyes smart and draws out the various fragrances from the woodland where she wanders when she can.⁵⁴⁹

3.3 “The shrine of his own desires”⁵⁵⁰: monstrous corporealities, fabrication and identitary journeys in *The Passion of New Eve*

⁵⁴⁷ Braidotti, Rosi, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge: Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers, p.133

⁵⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 131

⁵⁴⁹ Carter, Angela, *Burning Your Boats: Collected Short Stories*. Random House, 2016, p. 263

⁵⁵⁰ Carter, Angela, *The Passion of New Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015, p.125

The metamorphic process of becoming-woman establishes both a transitional-corporeal status and an identity mutation within the becoming-subject, and it constitutes, in Carter's universe, a further chance to re-discuss the dimension of the subject vs. the other/object/abject. At the same time, this process establishes the social construction that hides behind the gender binary that crystallises male and female as closed, biologically determined, normative dualities, and exasperates them until their most extreme and parodistic excess. The aim of this deconstruction is to unveil gender performativity and the heterosexist implications it generates, as well as the subversive, counternarrative, resisting usages of gender.

The monstrosity of the body-horror genre represents, in Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, the key aspect through which to analyse gender performativity, as well as the pornographic masculine stereotyped idea of the female body. As Sarah Gamble describes it, *The Passion of New Eve* can be seen as an example of 'hyperrealist fiction' due to the novel's profound intermingling of reality and fiction, in particular the reality that the individual creates by means of fiction, as in the case of the protagonist Evelyn. Moving from Britain to New York City, he leaves London having in mind an artificial image of the United States, the novel's main scenario, together with its deserted extra-urban, deserted landscapes, which Evelyn has fueled with erotic images that objectify his heroine and major erotic fantasy, the Hollywoodian diva, Tristessa de St. Ange. The incipit of the novel immediately presents Evelyn's pornographic fantasies of Tristessa, while he is sitting in the dark room of a cinema receiving a fellatio from a girlfriend while thinking about Tristessa: «The last night I spent in London, I took some girl or other to the movies and, through her mediation, I paid you a little tribute of spermatozoa, Tristessa».⁵⁵¹

Tristessa, the female object of Evelyn's fantasies, is a boundary creature, living between the 'dream' of the cinematic world (and being objectified by it) and the flesh of a body that will reveal itself to be, as well, a mirage. Like Albertina Hoffmann and the infernal desire machines of her father, Dr. Hoffmann, from Carter's 1972 novel, Tristessa de Saint Ange is presented as a fetishised, or else

⁵⁵¹ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*. Vol. 78. Hachette UK, 2015, p.1

idealised spectral, aethereal *femme fatale*, a product for mass consumption, reiterating Carter's work of investigation on women as objects that she had been working on for five years until the publication of her only essay, the 1979 *Sadeian Woman*.

In this work, in fact, albeit the misinterpretation by feminist authors like Andrea Dworkin, who accused Carter of writing a 'pseudofeminist literary essay'⁵⁵², Carter attempted «to urge women to repudiate the dubious status of passive, suffering martyr» and to show how patriarchal, consumerist imagery objectifies women and sets them in stereotypical images just as pornography does⁵⁵³. Therefore, far from legitimising the Marquis de Sade and his behaviours, Carter praises his attempt to include women as active participants of desire, rather than being reduced to objects of desire. In *The Passion of New Eve* there is a never-ending struggle enacted by the main character to atone for his chauvinist, objectifying faults made when he was biologically a male, and to escape from the attempts of hypersexualisation enacted by both the misogynist Poet Zero, a metaphoric paroxysm of masculinity, and by Mother from Beulah, a metaphoric paroxysm of the male fear of castration and emasculation. Mother, in order to punish Evelyn's attitude, transforms his body into a new, female, reproductive, perfect body. It is interesting how Carter's definition of de Sade as a 'moral pornographer' does fit perfectly with her demystifying intentions and her definition of *The Passion of New Eve* as an 'anti-mythic'⁵⁵⁴ novel in her *Notes from the Front Line*. A moral pornographer, for Carter,

would be an artist who uses pornographic material as part of the acceptance of the logic of a world of absolute sexual licence for all the genders, and projects a model of the way such a world might work. A moral pornographer might use pornography as a critique of current relations between the sexes. His business would be the total demystification of the flesh and the subsequent revelation, through the infinite modulations of the sexual act, of the real relations of man and his kind.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵² Dworkin, Andrea, *Pornography, Men Possessing Women*, London: The Women's Press, 1981, p.84

⁵⁵³ Sage, Lorna. *Angela Carter. Writers and Their Work*, Paperback, 2007., p. 110

⁵⁵⁴ Carter, Angela, *Shaking a Leg: Collected Journalism and Writings*. Random House, 2013.,

⁵⁵⁵ Carter, Angela, *The Sadeian woman: an exercise in cultural history*. Virago, 2015.

Therefore, as the opening scene shows, within the capitalist marketplace the body of women becomes the essentialist, 'tributary' essence of the masculine gaze. As Margaret Henderson specifies, «it sets the parameters for the [novel's] narrative: the voyeurism of the masculine gaze, the dislocation of desire, the objectification of women into woman, the sign system exploited by capitalist culture, as exemplified by Hollywood»⁵⁵⁶. As we will see as well in Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, both cinema and circus are spaces of capitalist exploitation where the male gaze queries and objectifies the monstrous female, whether a bird-woman freak like Fevvers or a drag queen who mocks the ideal of absolute and intangible image of female beauty (as we also saw in *The Loves of Lady Purple*, the theatrical scenario is a place where the same capitalist objectification occurs). Therefore, the resistance enacted by the grotesque subject acts as a trickster: both Tristessa and Fevvers adopt 'aenigma' as strategy of self-defense, both exploiting back the capitalist machine of illusions, the cinematic industry for Tristessa, the circus arena for Fevvers. The circus is, in this sense, the perfect Bakhtinian space of negotiation of identity, as the American culture is considered the promoter of Western cultural imagery and the relation between icons and mechanics of consumerism. For this reason, both Carter and Jean Baudrillard agree in their representation of America as the space of 'hyperreality', where the 'real' world and environment is amplified, validated and over-written by all the cultural fiction, the icons, the models that evoke that reality:

Today it is quotidian reality in its entirety-political, social, historical and economic-that from now on incorporates the simulatory dimension of hyperrealism. We live everywhere already in an "esthetic" hallucination of reality, The old slogan "truth is stranger than fiction," that still corresponded to the surrealist phase of this estheticization of life, is obsolete. There is no more fiction that life could possibly confront, even victoriously-it is reality itself that disappears utterly in the game of realityradical disenchantment, the cool and cybernetic phase following the hot stage of fantasy.⁵⁵⁷

The image of the Hollywoodian diva herself becomes, therefore, a hyperrealist parody of femininity, and Evelyn becomes the addressee of this masquerade: he

⁵⁵⁶ Henderson, Margaret. "Magical transformations: Angela Carter's The passion of new eve and nights at the circus." *Australian Feminist Studies* 10.22, 1995, pp. 59-75., p.61

⁵⁵⁷ Baudrillard, Jean, and Paul Foss. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext (e), 1983., pp.147-48

is the prototype of the heterosexist, white, privileged male, that takes advantage of an Afro-American prostitute, Leilah. He objectifies and fetishises her image, up until Leilah does cause a problems for Evelyn when he gets her pregnant, ultimately becoming sterile after a clandestine abortion. At that point, Evelyn, disappointed by and scared of New York, presented as a hell-city, and also scared of responsibilities he is incapable of taking, leaves the city for the challenges presented by the vastness of the American desert, becoming a 'victim' while he thought of himself as the 'bird of prey' in his relationship with Leilah. Once he is captured by the Beulah women and surgically transformed into a woman, he himself becomes «the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in [his] own head... [his own] masturbatory fantasy».⁵⁵⁸ He/she becomes, then, the active performer of a play based on the misappropriation of female and male corporealities, where the bodies become the active and symbolic field of negotiation for the image of the female subject reduced either to an allegory of beauty or to the battlefield of an active metamorphosis that resists the brutal objectification perpetrated by misogyny, epitomised by Zero, the Charles-Manson-like guru of the desert that will abduct and then rape Eve.

According to Sarah Gamble, in this way, Evelyn adopts the modernist, picaresque role of the hero or Baudelairian *flaneur*, (French: curious), whose «joy of watching is triumphant» according to Walter Benjamin, and who can become the *badaud* (French: observer). The passage from *flaneur* to *badaud* coincides with the moment in which the hero's identity blurs, as occurs to Evelyn, who feels lost in the «geometric labyrinth of the heart of the city»⁵⁵⁹ and prepares himself to become 'a tabula rasa' once he crosses the deserted space and symbolically loses his map. As Benjamin shows, while quoting Victor Fournel:

[While the] simple *flaneur* is always in full possession of his individuality... the individuality of the *badaud* disappears. It is absorbed by the outside world... which intoxicates him to the point where he forgets himself. Under the influence of the spectacle which presents itself to him, the *badaud* becomes an impersonal creature; he is no longer a human being, he is part of the public, of the crowd.⁵⁶⁰

⁵⁵⁸ Carter, Angela, *The Passion of New Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015, p.75

⁵⁵⁹ Ivi, p.21

⁵⁶⁰ Victor Fournel quoted in Benjamin, *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris*, quot. In Baudelaire, p.69, in S. Gamble, *Writing from the Front Line*, p.122

The crucial passage, therefore, of Evelyn moving from being an observer to a performer, is implicit in his fate: he moves from the symbolic scene of Chapter 1 in which he is observing and objectifying his lover Leilah while she dresses in front of the mirror, to being the persecuted maiden who is raped, surgically mutilated, assigned to a body that does not correspond to his gender identity, and consequently reduced to the loss of the self and anonymity. Evelyn passes from misinterpreting and abjectifying Leilah as 'impersonation of Otherness' to experiencing the grotesque condition of becoming-woman and evidencing Simone de Beauvoir's statement that 'one is not born a woman, but it becomes a woman through suffering'.⁵⁶¹

Eve, Tristessa and Leilah are the deconstructing figurations of the monstrous, disguised, castratingly devouring, surgically modified femininity that make meaning collapse once the reader realises that the three of them are forced, exasperated examples of a framed female 'iconicity' that makes the patriarchal essentialist and objectifying representation of women collapse. In her interview with Haffenden, Carter clearly declares the anti-essentialist ideology that guided her personal process of writing in *The Passion of New Eve*, and that enhances her demystifying battle against the imaginative creation of women:

I can see how it must look to some readers, but the point is that if dreams are real, as dreams, then there is a materiality to symbols: there's a materiality to imaginative life and imaginative experience which should be taken quite seriously. In *The Passion of New Eve* the central character is a transvestite movie star, and I created this person in order to say some quite specific things about the cultural production of femininity. The promotion slogan for the film *Gilda*, starring Rita Hayworth, was 'There was never a woman like Gilda', and that may have been one of the reasons why I made my Hollywood star a transvestite, a man, because only a man could think of femininity in terms of that slogan. Quite a number of people read *The Passion of New Eve* as a feminist tract and recoiled with suitable horror and dread, but in fact there is quite a careful and elaborate discussion of femininity as a commodity, of Hollywood producing illusions as tangible commodities – yet most of that was completely by-passed.⁵⁶²

⁵⁶¹ De Beauvoir, Simone, and Howard Madison Parshley. *The second sex. Translated from the French and edited by HM Parshley*. New English Library, 1969., p. 167 quoted in S. Gamble, *Writing from the Front Line*, p.122

⁵⁶² Haffenden, John, *Novelists in interview*. Routledge, 2019., p.86

In other words, Carter's demythologising intention presented in *The Passion of New Eve* makes her novel an example of 'speculative fiction', which was a tendency during 1970's stimulated by postmodern «excitement about demythologizing», probably urged by Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1972), which also included a reflection on cinematic imagery.⁵⁶³ Therefore, *The Passion of New Eve* acquires the objective of demythologising and parodying the «cinematic fetishization of the female body.»⁵⁶⁴ Leilah and Lilith, who is Leilah's guerrilla-leader alter ego, represent for Britzolakis a duplicitous figure in Carter's narration that may no longer be «the puppet of male-controlled scripts but who use theatricality and masquerade to invent and advance [herself].»⁵⁶⁵

Not by chance, when Carter published *Black Venus*, the character of Jeanne Duval was compared to Leilah as a reactualisation of the woman as Other that finally manages to acquire her voice. What we know about Leilah in *The Passion of New Eve*'s first chapter is always filtered by Evelyn's eye that enslaves her to be a subaltern example of eroticism and seduction. She is depicted as a black teenage Lolita and covered with patriarchal tropes of representation. As Kérchy notes,

she is siren, nymph, succubus, Lorelei, Rahab, the harlot and Lilith. Abjectified as 'profane essence of the death of the cities', 'beautiful garbage eater' (18), a rotten fruit, a poisoned wound (25), 'mud Lily' (29), and 'dressed meat' (31) she is duly punished as a 'born victim-submit[ting] to beatings and degradations with a curious, ironic laughter" (28).⁵⁶⁶

The narrative function of Evelyn and Leilah's relationship in *The Passion of New Eve* is to anticipate the extremisation of their relationship when Evelyn will be

⁵⁶³ In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes writes that “Garbo appartient encore à ce moment du cinéma où la saisie du visage humain jetait les foules dans le plus grand trouble, où l'on se perdait littéralement dans une image humaine comme dans un philtre, où le visage constituait une sorte d'état absolu de la chair, que l'on ne pouvait ni atteindre ni abandonner. Quelques années avant, le visage de Valentino opérait des suicides ; celui de Garbo participe encore du même règne d'amour courtois, où la chair développe des sentiments mystiques de perdition”. The example of Greta Garbo as myth is a perfect prototype of the mythical image of the diva and *femme fatale* designed by Carter in *The Passion of New Eve*. (see the essay “Le visage de Garbo” on Greta Garbo's myth in Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Editions Seuil, 2007, p. 65

⁵⁶⁴ Bristow, Joseph, and Trev Lynn Broughton. *The infernal desires of Angela Carter: fiction, femininity, feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.50

⁵⁶⁵ Ivi, p.51

⁵⁶⁶ Kérchy, Anna, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic Point of View*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2008., p.100

forced to become Eve and will be enslaved and abducted by Zero. Leilah represents the monstrous, pornographic and abject fantasy Evelyn has projected onto her. In the emblematic scene of Leilah's self-contemplation in the mirror, the Fournelian distinction between the *flaneur* and the *badaud* is displayed. Here, Di Luzio argues, the ritualistic dressing process of Leilah disguised as *femme fatale* evokes not only the voyeuristic pleasure of the masculine gaze, but also the tension and the discomfort of the female subject that feels herself being transformed into the Other, the woman inside the mirror. There is, then, a doppelganger-ism that occurs during Leilah's dressing performance:

I used to adore to watch her dressing herself in the evenings, before she went out to the clubs, the theatres, the restaurants where she performed, which I never visited. I would lie on her bed like a pasha, smoking, watching, in her cracked mirror,⁵⁶⁷ the transformation of the grubby little bud who slumbered all day in her filth; she was a night-blooming flower. But, unlike a flower, she did not grow beautiful by a simple process of becoming. Her beauty was an accession. She arrived at it by a conscious effort. She became absorbed in the contemplation of the figure in the mirror but she did not seem to me to apprehend the person in the mirror as, in any degree, herself. The reflected Leilah had a concrete form and, although this form was perfectly tangible, we all knew, all three of us in the room, it was another Leilah. Leilah invoked this formal other with a gravity and ritual that recalled witchcraft; she brought into being a Leilah who lived only in the not-world of the mirror and then became her own reflection.⁵⁶⁸

As Olga Kenyon observes, «Carter perceives the mirror as inimical because it lures a woman into two complicity with her false by enabling her to see herself as others do and spend energy trying to change».⁵⁶⁹ Leilah, thus, loses her own identity in the act of becoming Evelyn's fetishised image of her, she becomes the other through the gaze of the subject, Evelyn, that transforms her in in a mythical, necromantic creature. This is what John Berger calls the 'masculine gaze', stating that how a woman appears to a man can determine «how she will be treated [...] one may simplify this by saying: men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. These determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves.

⁵⁶⁷ Notice how the cracked mirror can already be read here as an anticipation in Leilah's later doppelganging and splitted double-objectification as woman and fetishized *femme fatale*

⁵⁶⁸ Carter, Angela, *The Passion of New Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015. p.28

⁵⁶⁹ Kenyon, Olga. *Writing Women Contemporary Women Novelists*. 1991, p. 16

The surveyor of woman herself is male: the surveyed, female. Thus, she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision: a sight». ⁵⁷⁰

The mirror in *The Passion of New Eve* strategically returns, once Evelyn has been surgically transformed into a woman and looks at himself in the mirror, the artificial nature of femininity as a social construct emerges as Evelyn is faced with the inconsolable duplicity of his inner being, and masculine self, and his artificial female body that he himself objectifies in the mirror. Evelyn will not, in fact, become Eve through the surgical excision of his sex, nor through the attempt of the Mother to impregnate her; as De Beauvoir prophesied Evelyn becomes Eve through his/her liminal experiences lived and incarnated through his/her own body. The mirror, then, testifies to the awareness of Eve and Evelyn of their own experience: being entrapped in a feminine body shaved on the *femme fatale* model figure and assisting to the attendance of erasure of his own identity through the picaresque journey that are awaits her. Evelyn's post-operative gender dysphoria emerges once he looks at his changed image in the Beulah's mirror and is sexually aroused by his new body:

But when I looked in the mirror, I saw Eve; I did not see myself. I saw a young woman who, though she was I, I could in no way acknowledge as myself, for this one was only a lyrical abstraction of femininity to me, a tinted arrangement of curved lines. I touched the breasts and the mound that were not mine; I saw white hands in the mirror move, it was as though they were white gloves I had put on to conduct the unfamiliar orchestra of myself. [...] But my over-taxed brain almost exploded, then, for the clitoris transplant had been an unqualified success. The tactile sensation was so well-remembered and gave me so much pleasure, still, I could scarcely believe the cleft was now my own. Let the punishment fit the crime, whatever it had been. They had turned me into the Playboy center fold. I was the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in my own head. I had become my own masturbatory fantasy. And – how can I put it – the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself. ⁵⁷¹

This scene, by analogy and by contrast, is easily comparable to Frankenstein's monster's self-reflection in the pond, once he realises his aspect and abhors his own appearance, which is so different from that of the DeLacey's family members. While in Carter's novel, however, the distancing of Evelyn is explicit by his

⁵⁷⁰ Berger, John, *Ways of seeing*, Penguin, London, 1972.

⁵⁷¹ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*. Vol, Virago Press, London, 2015., pp.74-75

sexual arousal for his female body, in Shelley's *Frankenstein* the recognition of the monster as such means the recognition of being an otherness. Both the Creature and Evelyn, now Eve, have become an objectified otherness. Interestingly, while describing the passage in which the monster sees himself in the pond, Peter Brooks evokes as a point of contrast the Monster compared to John Milton's Eve in *Paradise Lost*. Specifically, this scene refers to Eve's account of her creation, in Book 4⁵⁷² (vv. 460-76) of *Paradise Lost*. Here, Eve finds a mirroring lake in which she almost narcissistically contemplates her image, her biologically determinist fate of «Mother of human Race: what could I/do, /But follow straight, invisibly thus led?»⁵⁷³. According to Brooks, this Miltonian passage describes Eve's discovery of the law, including the law of sexual difference, governed by the rule of the phallus. Miltonian Eve's desire for her own image is dangerous, as detected by Milton, since it anticipates Eve's disobedience when she perpetrates the Original Sin by her hand. Therefore, through Adam, who holds her hand and impedes her contemplate image in the lake, Eve understands her duty to be a submissive being to the male authority. Vice versa, the Shelleyan monster, as Brooks explains,

discovers himself as different, as violation of the law, in a scenario that {207} mirrors and reverses Lacan's; the outer image -- that in the mirror -- presents the body in its lack of wholeness (at least in human terms) while the inner apprehension of the body had up until then held it to be hypothetically whole: 'At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror.' The experience is anti-narcissistic, convincing the Monster that he is, indeed, a monster, thus in no conceivable system an object of desire. [...] The experience is anti-narcissistic, convincing the Monster that he is, indeed, a monster, thus in no conceivable system an object of desire. [...] The mirror image becomes the negation of hope, severing the Monster from desire. He is simply outside the law, and thus will require a separate creation -- his own Eve -- in order to come under its sway.⁵⁷⁴

On the contrary, but also by analogy, Evelyn from *The Passion of New Eve* does not only recognise his female new body as his own masturbatory fantasy, meaning his ideal of female erotic image, but he also identifies himself as a monstrous object of desire, comparing his own artificial body to the 'Playboy

⁵⁷² Milton, John, *Paradise Lost*, 460-76, Book 4

⁵⁷³ Ivi, Book 4, 474-76

⁵⁷⁴ Brooks, Peter. "IX." *Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts": Language, Nature, and Monstrosity.* *The Endurance of Frankenstein*. University of California Press, 2020. 205-220., p.207

center fold', the highest heterosexual male expression of desire. As with the Miltonian Eve, his contemplation does serve, as it did for the first Eve, to make her conscious of her female beauty. Rather, it re-classifies Evelyn's body as 'sexy monstrous otherness' objectified by his inner male gaze and eroticised by his mental cock. In other terms, Eve recognises the artificiality of the new Eve she has in front of her and transforms her into a *femme fatale*, created by the Amazons from Beulah as punishment against male misogyny, perpetrated against Leilah by Evelyn himself in Chapter 1.

In *The Passion of New Eve*, Carter plays with the French Symbolism and the Decadent writing of the *fin-de-siècle*, as well as with Surrealist writing, enacting a demythologising process on the artificial image of women that, especially in those literary currents insisted on the female figure of the prostitute and the mechanical woman. Carter's intertextual use of high and low culture in a literary pastiche leads her to consider Western and European cultures as «a great scrap-yard from which you can assemble all sorts of new vehicles.»⁵⁷⁵ Therefore, playing with the fetishistic male double image of woman as *femme fatale* and android that, according to Britzolakis, solidified Western society's «ambivalent response to the rationalising, technological forces of capitalism»⁵⁷⁶ as an opposite feminist response to the male-authored texts that engaged the female monster in this double representation. For instance, the figure of Eve in Carter's novel has an intertextual, explicit connection with Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's 1886 novel *L'Eve Future*. In this work, the myth of the creation of the artificial female body of the danseuse Evelyn Habal is used by Carter to subvert the literary metaphor of fatal, mechanical femininity, from Edgar Allan Poe and Baudelaire and the Symbolists, and she uses the artificiality of her creation as female as a pretext to put in evidence gender performativity and the social constructs that shape bodies and identities. This artificiality, both in Carter's and de l'Isle-Adam's novels, becomes an unavoidable allusion to cinema and to the late-19th century promise that, on the occasion of the Lumière Brothers' cinematic debut, claimed that «death will no longer be absolute» and that cinema would be «the victory of

⁵⁷⁵ Haffenden, John, *Novelists in interview*. Routledge, 2019., p.92

⁵⁷⁶ Bristow, Joseph, and Trev Lynn Broughton. *The infernal desires of Angela Carter: fiction, femininity, feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.50

Man over oblivion».⁵⁷⁷ This very immortality acquired through the cinematic image is obtained by Tristessa who, while his shaped on the model of the Hollywoodian diva, is herself a deception to the masculine, capitalist attempt of imprisoning the image of female beauty into an immortal body that is the body of male person performing a female icon. It is interesting how this deconstructionist usage by character of the transgender and *femme fatale* body can be read through Sandy Stone's theories developed in her essay *The Empire Strikes Back: a Posttranssexual Manifesto*, in which Stone repeatedly defines transsexuals as 'screens', 'embodied texts' and 'genres', stating that «[b]odies are screens on which we see projected the momentary settlements that emerge from ongoing struggles over beliefs and practices within the academic and medical communities».⁵⁷⁸ There is, according to Stone, a textual violence enacted by the heteronormative system in order to appropriate of the voice of the trans subject and to distinguish their corporeality from the biological male and female:

As with genetic women, transsexuals are infantilized, considered too illogical or irresponsible to achieve true subjectivity, or clinically erased by diagnostic criteria; or else, as constructed by some radical feminist theorists, as robots of an insidious and menacing patriarchy, an alien army designed and constructed to infiltrate, pervert and destroy "true" women.⁵⁷⁹

While in *The Passion of New Eve* the aim of the parthenogenetic community of Beulah is enacting quite the opposite methodology of fight against the essentialist idea of men, namely by taking a cisgender, heterosexual man and transforming him into a sex symbol while annihilating his male physical experience, Evelyn's first-person narrative in *The Passion of New Eve* reacts to the unstoppable attempts to reduce his experience to that of the subaltern being, whose process of becoming-woman is enacted only through a symbolic getaway through the deserted spaces and through a cyclical return to the Old World.

In *Desire and Narrative*, Teresa de Lauretis states that "Story demands sadism", analysing a wide range of narratives where sadism appears as an agent

⁵⁷⁷ Di Luzio, Alessandra. *La visione persistente: percorsi intertestuali e intermediali nella scrittura di Angela Carter*. Vol. 31. Pàtron, 2008., p.113

⁵⁷⁸ Stone, Sandy. *The empire strikes back: A posttranssexual manifesto*. Routledge, 2013.

⁵⁷⁹ Ivi, p.13

of the narrative, from Oedipus to DeMaurier's *Rebecca*. This is due, de Lauretis explains, to the fact that sadism acts as a “generative force of patriarchal narrative governed by a mythical-textual mechanics where the hero, 'the universal subject', is constructed as male, and as such as «the active principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences, whereas the female is “not susceptible to transformation, to life or death,» since se ('it') is reduced to «an element of plot-space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter.»⁵⁸⁰ This theoretical assumption by de Lauretis works perfectly to describe the strategic deconstruction enacted by Carter on the main character from *The Passion of New Eve*. Evelyn experiences not only a gradual process of feminisation that renders him a monstrous, Deleuzian becoming-woman, he is also nullified as a male hero who is safeguarded as 'creator of difference' and obliged to corporeally experience the materiality of a female, resisting body. At the same time, he experiences what it means to become a fetish for of sadism and an object functional to patriarchal fantasies. The de Beauvoirian 'woman-creation' passes through Evelyn's mutilated, metamorphic, and traumatised body.

According to Kérchy, the in-between condition of this novel in Carter's literary production might also have led to a change in Carter herself from her definition of her own writing as a 'male impersonator' into a more conscious, politically involved woman writer.⁵⁸¹ Even Johnson evidences the importance in *The Passion of New Eve* of «Carter's disclosure of the relation of the metaphorical and the literal,» as well as the importance of the allegorical schemes and images constantly evoked as contrasting forces and elements carefully defined as binarisms. The dark sequence of visions Carter shapes in *The Passion of New Eve* has been described by Carter herself as a “piece of black comedy”.⁵⁸²

When the novel was published, in 1977, two years before *The Bloody Chamber* and one year before *The Sadeian Woman* (although we may assume that the completion of her essay, simultaneously to her writing of *The Passion of New Eve*, deeply influenced the novel from a theoretical and thematic point of

⁵⁸⁰ De Lauretis, Teresa. *Alice Doesn't. Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984, p. 119

⁵⁸¹ Kérchy, Anna, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic Point of View*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2008., p.97

⁵⁸² Haffenden, John, *Novelists in interview*. Routledge, 2019.

view, as if *The Sadeian Woman* were the theory while *The Passion of New Eve* the practice of the representation of the fetishised female body), it received contradictory reviews. Peter Ackroyd from *The Spectator* defined it an uneasy «shuffling between pastiche and allegory» and blamed the novel's «languorous but cheap sentiment that doesn't have the substance to match its style.»⁵⁸³ Even Lorna Sage, who had a deep interest in Carter's writing, expressed her uncertainty about the novel's final result, declaring that «*New Eve* is a raw and savage book. Carter sacrificed some of her habitual charm when she started to anatomise the androgynous zone she had so far contrived to inhabit.»⁵⁸⁴

However, apart from the later recognition of Carter's avant-gardist view in describing the female body as a cultural construct, it is important to situate *The Passion of New Eve* within Carter's literary production. I agree with Kérchy's interpretation of Carter's four final novels as a sequence of picaresque identity journeys towards the deconstruction of myths and the spectacularisation of subversive corporealities. *The Passion of New Eve*, the second novel of this sequence (1°: *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffmann*, 1972; 2°: *The Passion of New Eve*, 1977; 3°: *Nights at the Circus*, 1984; 4°: *Wise Children*, 1991) occupies an intermediate position that perfectly corresponds to the ambiguous and ambivalent identity metamorphosis of Carter's Eve, who is mirrored by the transvestite movie-star and crystallised icon of feminine beauty, Tristessa. It is this character, according to Kérchy, who embodies «an in-between, gender-bender, Tiresias-like destabilising picaro-picara fusion»⁵⁸⁵. It is also important to recall that this novel represents Carter's passage from the realism of the Bristol trilogy (started with 1966's *Shadow Dance*, followed by 1968's *Several Perceptions*, and concluding with 1971's *Love*), to a picaresque, allegorical, speculative fiction that included the science-fictional *Heroes and Villains*, a dystopian deserted novel (1969), and the surrealist experimentations from *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffmann*.

⁵⁸³ P. Ackroyd, *Passion Fruit*, *The Spectator*, 26 march 1977, pp.23-4

⁵⁸⁴ Sage, Lorna, *Angela Carter*, p.33

⁵⁸⁵ Kérchy, Anna, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic Point of View*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. , p.96

3.3.1. *The Passion of New Eve*: synopsis of a cyclical journey

In Chapter 1, Evelyn, an Englishman moving from London, pays a symbolic 'spermatozoa tribute' to his erotic teenage fantasy, the Hollywoodian icon Tristessa de St. Ange, an incarnation of suffering, a spectacle that has always aroused Evelyn. Upon arriving in New York City, where he is meant to work as an English literature professor at the New York University, Evelyn is surprised by his realisation that America does not correspond to the cinematic fantasy of it he had created in his own mind. New York, in fact, is depicted as a dystopian, lisergic battlefield *à-la-Mad Max*⁵⁸⁶ devastated by urban guerrillas, waste, rats and criminal gangs («But in New York I found, instead of hard edges and clean colours, a lurid, Gothic darkness that closed over my head entirely and became my world».)⁵⁸⁷

Here, after discovering that his position as a professor has been lost due to a gang's invasion of New York University, Evelyn meets the Czech alchemist Baroslav, who gives him gold as a present and whose introduction foreshadows Evelyn's alchemical experience in the desert, as the «picture of an hermaphrodite carrying a golden egg»⁵⁸⁸ in Baroslav's room hints. Baroslav is later killed by a gang of rioters and Evelyn meets Leilah, a young teenage black girl, with whom he starts having a torbid sexual relationship based on bulimic consumption of food and sex. This eventually turns into a toxic dynamic of female objectification, as Leilah performs as a *femme fatale* in Evelyn's eyes, and is tied to Evelyn's bed with chains while he is not at home. When Leilah discovers she is pregnant and Evelyn refuses to take any responsibility, Leilah gets a clandestine abortion that causes her to get an infection. In order to survive, she undergoes surgery to remove her uterus and ovaries, and is reduced surgically sterile. Following this event, Evelyn leaves New York and its decadence and decides to go into the desert, «the waste heart of that vast country (...) chimera o chimeras»⁵⁸⁹, «the post-menopausal part of the earth»,⁵⁹⁰ where he gets lost after losing his map,

⁵⁸⁶ Bristow, Joseph, and Trev Lynn Broughton. *The infernal desires of Angela Carter: fiction, femininity, feminism*. Routledge, 2014., p.169

⁵⁸⁷ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015., p.6

⁵⁸⁸ Ivi, p. 13

⁵⁸⁹ Ivi, p.34

⁵⁹⁰ Ivi, p.37

inside «a landscape that matches the landscape of his heart»⁵⁹¹. While in the desert, in Chapter Five, he is abducted by a woman who reveals herself to be an Amazon from the parthenogenetic, underworld community of Beulah, «the place where the contrarities exist together»,⁵⁹² a mysterious, monstrous, semi-divine figure of Mother. In Beulah, Mother, 'the Great Parricide' and 'Grand Emasculator',⁵⁹³ whom he discovers is also Leilah's mother, who has suffered from sterility because of Evelyn's misogynist, privileged lack of interest, decides to use Evelyn as a matrix for her experiment to surgically and psychologically eradicate masculinity from Evelyn's identity, transforming Evelyn into the New Eve. However, before being impregnated with his own sperm in Mother's parthenogenetic experiment, Evelyn, now become Eve (and from this moment on she will refer to herself with female pronouns), manages to escape from Beulah, defying again the vastness of the desert, and recognising her own condition of hybrid, erased subject:

I know nothing. I am a tabula erasa, a blank sheet of paper, an unhatched egg. I have not yet become a woman, although I possess a woman's shape. Not a woman, no; both more and less than a real woman. Now I am a being as mythic and monstrous as Mother herself; but I cannot bring myself to think of that. Eve remains willfully in the state of innocence that precedes the fall.⁵⁹⁴

After becoming conscious of her new condition, Eve is abducted again by the sterile poet Zero, a one-eyed, one-legged misogynistic patriarch, chief of a community of silenced women-slaves whom he regularly rapes and beats up. After Eve is raped herself and is elected as his new wife, Zero reveals his hatred against Tristessa, the iconic cinematic figure about whom Evelyn had always fantasised. Zero blames Tristessa for having made him, he claims sterile, and calls her the 'Queen of Dykes'.⁵⁹⁵ Therefore, Zero's intention is to find Tristessa's mansion in the desert, where she has retired, away from the capitalist cinematic industry, and to kill her. Once they have found Tristessa's mausoleum, filled with grotesque, wax sculptures of Hollywood actors tragically departed and

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

⁵⁹² Ivi, p.45

⁵⁹³ Ivi, p.46

⁵⁹⁴ Ivi, p.79

⁵⁹⁵ Ivi, p.98

fagocitated by the cinema industry in one way or another, they discover that Tristessa is hiding among them, while sleeping in a coffin. Zero entraps the actress and rips off her clothes, revealing that she has male genitals. The poet tortures Tristessa with a whip and then celebrates Eve and Tristessa's forced marriage, in a mocking ceremony that subverts and exasperates the gender performativity between the two of them. After that, they are forced to have intercourse and, as we will discover later, Tristessa impregnates Eve. In a moment of distraction by Zero, Tristessa activates the house spinning mechanism, and while she and Eve flee, Tristessa's house crashes spitting out Zero's wives one by one and devouring Zero, who is likely killed by the collapse of debris. Tristessa and Eve spend the night in the desert and have intercourse again. The following day, they are captured by a band of kids captained by a boy called the Colonel. Once they discover that Tristessa is a man, one of the officers shoots and kills her. After grieving her death, Eve manages to escape from the clan of kids with their Jeep, as once she has decided not to let herself die near Tristessa's grave and to react, she drives away into the desert. After many deadly attacks, she is hurt in a gun fight in an abandoned shopping center, and upon being brought to a room full of injured people, she meets Leilah, now Lilith, who is no longer the submissive, hypersexualised Lolita-girl Evelyn knew, but who has become a guerrilla leader. Eve tells Lilith about her picaresque sex-change experience, and after that Lilith reveals to Eve that Mother from Beulah is her mother, and she brings Eve to a bay, where Eve encounters Mother again. This time, however, Mother is no longer the fearsome, monstrous matriarch that mutilated Evelyn. Deprived of her powers, Mother is now another simulacrum, an old, harmless woman addicted to alcohol. Here, Eve realises that she is nothing but «a figure of speech and has retired to a cave beyond consciousness».⁵⁹⁶ The following day, Lilith brings Eve to a cave and invites her inside in order to be born again. Eve crosses the cave, which has the mucosity and consistency of a female womb, and once she merges from the cave, reborn, and after paying Mother with the golden ingot tribute that Baroslav had given to Evelyn, Eve takes a boat and

⁵⁹⁶ Ivi, p.180

pregnant with Tristessa's child, crosses the sea, into the unknown or to the earth from where she had come from:

I arrived on that continent by air and I left it by water; earth and fire I leave behind me. And all this strange experience, as I remember it, confounds itself in a fugue. At night, dreaming, I go back again to Tristessa's house, that echoing mansion, that hall of mirrors in which my whole life was lived, the glass mausoleum that had been the world and now is smashed. He himself often comes to me in the night, serene in his marvellous plumage of white hair, with the fatal red hole in his breast; after many, many embraces, he vanishes when I open my eyes. The vengeance of the sex is love. Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth.⁵⁹⁷

3.3.1 Grotesque corporealities in *The Passion of New Eve*

The metamorphosis of the corporeal dimension in *The Passion of New Eve*, together with its abject transgression of gender boundaries, its exuberance and its mutilation, constitutes the central topic for Angela Carter's novel. As already mentioned, the intermediate position of *The Passion of New Eve* in Carter's literary production of bodily-picaresque works also serves to explain the centripetal function that the in-process condition of the monstrous female bodies from the novel incarnates. In Carter's work, as in the short stories I have previously analysed, the transgressive power of the weird/freak/grotesque woman is due to her ability to recognise herself as a figure of abjection. Eve understands perfectly well her condition of corporeal imprisonment and her monstrous, artificial beauty and narrates it accordingly. Similarly, Tristessa decides to disguise herself as a woman and to become an allegory of sadness, just as Mother from Beulah has deliberately chosen to convert herself into a terrifying 'figure of speech' and a male castrator. Even Leilah, during her phase of seduction of Evelyn, is willing to convert herself into a *femme fatale*, eating junk food, suffering the bodily mutilation of the surgical removal of her uterus and ovaries, and wearing bondage clothes like heels and leather accessories, transforming herself into a Baudelairian "Black Venus" of eerie and sick sensuality mixed with fatality. Zero, as well, presents grotesque physical and symbolical characteristics, underlined by his missing leg and eye. His submissive wives, obliged to be bald and deprived of their incisor teeth so that they can practice oral

⁵⁹⁷ Ivi, p.187

sex on Zero without biting him, obliged to communicate only with animal sounds rather than in human language, and treated worse than Zero's pigs, are another example of the grotesque and the abject.

In Carter's novel, then, due to the allegorical, didascalical symbolism that permeates the action, the exaggerated charge of each character, each of whom represents a myth, is brought to its extreme hypersaturation at the point at which the almost-parodistic and tragicomical effect that derives from the characters' image is *The Passion of New Eve's* use of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque power of grotesque. Nevertheless, while the Bakhtinian carnivalesque power of the grotesque applied to the Medieval scenario evolves into the strategic and dialogic encounter between high and low social class figures, here their artificiality and solipsistic persistence as simulacra of constructed myths is the evolution of a new way to apply the grotesque. Carter constructs an anti-mythical novel while representing these myths all together and making them collapse one by another by means of an individual existential journey. This journey is necessary for them to undergo in order to acquire either the self-recognition of simulacra, as in the cases of Tristessa and Mother, or to accept their condition of new subjectivities shaped by their own experience, along with the risks of being active, resisting figures of counternarration. This occurs to Lilith, previously Leilah; it occurs to Zero who, in his quest of searching for and annihilating Tristessa ends up being annihilated himself (he literally becomes 'Zero', being phagocytised by the diva's house, and it also happens to Evelyn's masculinity, when he leaves his misogynist objectifying past and becomes Eve, the quintessential woman who embraces the mystery of the Ocean. To an extent, I would consider all of the novel's main characters as a declination of Haraway's theorisation of the 'cyborg' both for the cyborg artificial hybridation of machinery and organic material, and also for its political function as a creature destined to inhabit a post-gender world:

A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed "women's experience:" as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility. The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's

experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.⁵⁹⁸

The artificiality of Evelyn, Tristessa, Mother and Leilah/Lilith makes them cyborg figurations, while each one embodies a myth that is brought to its highest allegorical validity, at the point that when Mother loses her powers of Grand Emasculator, Carter's intentions of demystifying motherhood as fearful monster of male psychoanalytic invention are evident.⁵⁹⁹ Similarly, Leilah's journey from passive figure of seduction to active Amazon also demystifies the sadomasochistic structure that Evelyn, and to a wider extend the male gaze, had relegated her to. In other terms, the science-fictional scenario of *The Passion of New Eve* supports the socio-political function of demythization that each character acquires through a strategic essentialism adopted by Carter. Plus, it confirms the characters' function as cyborg figurations made of both reality and artificiality, serving to expose the social constructs of gender performativity that Carter reveals to the reader.

The Bakhtinian grotesqueness of the bodies represented in Carter's novel derives from their assertion as «epitome[s] of incompleteness» in their representation of «life in its two-fold contradictory process».⁶⁰⁰ Furthermore, the repeated depiction of bodily fluids and secretions, as well as the references to sex, childbirth, the mucosity and viscosity of organs, surgery mutilation, abortion, and so on, does respond both to the grotesque consideration of the grotesque body as «not closed, complete unit [which] is unfinished, outgrows itself [and] transgresses its own limits» and does also respond to the Kristevan depiction of the abject as a boundary-transgressing figuration that «disturbs identity, system, order».⁶⁰¹ Further, Carter describes images like blood, vomit, feces, sweat, and tears, all elements classified as abject bodily wastes. Even the experience of pain that the bodies live in their own skin, such as Evelyn's castration, Eve's birth, Leilah's

⁵⁹⁸ Haraway, Donna Jeanne, *The Haraway Reader*. Psychology Press, 2004., p.6

⁵⁹⁹ See Creed, Barbara, *The monstrous-feminine: Film, feminism, psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 2015.

⁶⁰⁰ Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaïlovich, and Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and his world*. Vol. 341. Indiana University Press, 1984., pp.24-33

⁶⁰¹ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of horror*. Vol. 98. University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 1982., p.4

abortion and uterus removal, Zero's wives' mutilations, and Tristessa's physical abuse culminating with her death by execution, are all processes that centralise the transmutating action of body-as-material experience.

As Michiko Takahashi rightly observes, the postmodern spirit of *The Passion of New Eve* presents a double coexistence of both the Medieval and the Romantic grotesque theorised by Bakhtin, which I have already mentioned in Chapter 1.⁶⁰²

As we saw, the Medieval grotesque promotes images of open and unfinished bodies that mingled freely with one another during carnivals, and evoked positive and assertive images of bodily life, fertility, growth and abundance. The Romantic grotesque, instead, followed the post-Renaissance age, when a closed idea of corporeality was supported, as a complete and self-sufficient experience. Therefore, Bakhtin attributes to this new version of the grotesque found in the post-Renaissance age a body which does not fit the aesthetic of Beautiful which was supported during the Romantic Era. This brings to a declination of the Romantic grotesque as an experience of a subjective and individualistic worldview. As Michiko Takahashi explains, «[i]n modern times, [...] the ever unfinished nature of the body was hidden, kept secret conception, pregnancy, childbirth, death throes, were almost never shown.»⁶⁰³ In *The Passion of New Eve*, however, both the experience of a Medieval grotesque corporeality, open and projected to a rebirth and metamorphic process, represented by Evelyn and Leilah and a static, negative, symbolically crystallised grotesqueness, represented by both Zero and Mother, who constitute in the novel the two opposite polarities of a monstrous masculinity and a monstrous femininity are depicted.

Another static figure, representing a further example of Romantic grotesque par excellence, is Tristessa, who is her own image, has no story behind the public role that she has been given by the cinematic world: she is nothing but an icon, whose only possibility is to die as such, and to remain devoted to her

⁶⁰² Takahashi, Michiko, *The Grotesque Body in Angela Carter's The Passion of New Eve*, 近畿大学教養・外国語教育センター紀要. 外国語編 近畿大学教養・外国語教育センター紀要. 外国語編 4(2), 1-14, 2013

⁶⁰³ Ivi, p.7

individualistic, closed negation of “becoming”, but rather isolating herself in her House of Sorrows filled with waxed, mutilated bodies of dead icons from movies. Her role in the story is activated by her meeting with Eve, her in-process counterpart; otherwise, she would have remained in her mansion, closed into her individualistic Romantic grotesque experience, forever.

Heather L. Johnson has perfectly explained the coexistence of these two opposite representations of the grotesque experience and has contextualised Eve's final acceptance of a reconciliation between her mind and her body as the catharsis that the Medieval, Rabelaisian grotesque body aims to drive forward:

New Eve's body has been designed by Mother to reflect an ideal of perfect femininity as determined by social norms. Yet it is clear that Eve [sic] herself regards the process by which this appearance of normality has been achieved as grotesque in itself.

She cannot forget that her present body is a manufactured one: “I had been born out of discarded flesh, induced to a new life by means of cunning hypodermics, that my pretty face had been constructed out of a painful fabric of skin from my old inner thighs?”⁶⁰⁴

When Eve looks into the face of Tristessa she is instantly reminded that they are “mysteriously twinned by [their] synthetic life”⁶⁰⁵

I will here focus further on the characters of Tristessa, Mother, Zero and Zero's wives in order to investigate the traits that define them as grotesque characters.

3.3.1.1. Tristessa

Tristessa is immediately introduced in *The Passion of New Eve* as both an ephemeral incarnation of sadness, her very name symbolises her condition, and as an incarnation of an erotic fantasy, as Evelyn shows while fantasising about her while receiving a fellatio in a movie theatre where they are screening a Tristessa's movie, *Wuthering Heights*. Curiously, from the first chapter, both Tristessa's iconic abstractness and her camp-gender subversive power emerge. She is described as «Enigma [...] the [masculine] dream itself made flesh though the flesh I knew her in was not flesh itself but only a moving picture of flesh, real

⁶⁰⁴ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015., p.143

⁶⁰⁵ Johnson, Heather, *Textualizing the double-gendered body: forms of the grotesque in 'The Passion of New Eve'* (Angela Carter), *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, sep. 22, 1994

but not substantial.»⁶⁰⁶ Thus, Tristessa's artificiality emerges in all her mockery power of male illusion even though, at the same time, this is produced by a male “necrophiliac” imagery of women. Also, her blasphemous, hybrid iconicity is synthesised in Evelyn's reflections on Tristessa's career:

Tristessa had long since joined Billie Holliday and Judy Garland in the queenly pantheon of women who expose their scars with pride, pointing to their emblematic despair just as a medieval saint points to the wounds of his martyrdom, and no drag-artiste felt his repertoire complete without a personation of her magic and passionate sorrow.⁶⁰⁷

Therefore, Tristessa's gender performativity has already made her a camp icon, to the point of being considered a drag-queen icon. In her cultural manifesto, *Notes on Camp*, Susan Sontag defines camp as a sensibility that revels in artifice,

a vision of the world in terms of style [...] It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off', of things-being-what-they-are-not. [...] The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of camp sensibility. Examples: the swooning, slim, sinuous figures of pre-Raphaelite painting and poetry; the thin, flowing, sexless bodies in Art Nouveau prints and posters, presented in relief on lamps and ashtrays; the haunting androgynous vacancy behind the perfect beauty of Greta Garbo.⁶⁰⁸

Hence, as 'vacant' icon, drag-queen, icon of celluloid sexuality, and as camp icon, Tristessa is a doomed character, since she is a closed circuit just like the Lady of the House of Love. She embodies a male projection of femininity and she cannot conceive of an idea of the female experience that could be different from hers.

As Gamble observes, she corresponds to Andy Warhol's description of drag queens as «living testimony to the way women used to want to be, and the way some people still want them to be».⁶⁰⁹ She is, thus, a male projection of femininity, and even her name, Tristessa de St. Ange, is a provocative Carterian allusion to de Sade's *Philosophy in the Boudoir*.

However, although Tristessa remains a closed circuit, locked in her Romantic grotesque individualism, her drag role responds not only to Warhol's male fantasies of a kind of femininity, but also to a theatrical femininity that

⁶⁰⁶ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015., p.4

⁶⁰⁷ Ivi, p.2

⁶⁰⁸ Sontag, Susan, *Notes on camp*. Penguin, United Kingdom, 2018., p.9

⁶⁰⁹ Warhol, A. quoted in Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture*), in Gamble, NFL, p.127

corresponds to Warhol's definition of drag. Tristessa also experiences the subversive potential that the post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler associates to drag: «[drag] reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality [...]». Butler also defines drag as «the site of a certain ambivalence, one which reflects the more general situation of being implicated in the very regimes of power by which one is constituted and, hence, of being implicated in the very regimes of power that one opposes.»⁶¹⁰ Tristessa legitimises the iconic diva who suffers and who is the object of male desire, and in this way subverts that idyllic image of femininity. Her self-creation, of which she tells Eve after escaping from Zero, is an agnition narration that demonstrates how she shaped herself on the base of her own essentialist notions of what it means to be a woman. Once her sex is discovered, Eve considers the artifice behind her/his erotic fantasy ever:

That was why he had been the perfect man's woman! He had made himself the shrine of his own desires, had made of himself the only woman he could have loved! If a woman is indeed beautiful only in so far as she incarnates most completely the secret aspirations of man, no wonder Tristessa had been able to become the most beautiful woman in the world, an unbegotten woman who made no concessions to humanity.⁶¹¹

Even Tristessa, during her autobiographical tale, admits:

'Passivity,' he said. 'Inaction. That time should not act upon me, that I should not die. So I was seduced by the notion of a woman's being, which is negativity. Passivity, the absence of being. To be everything and nothing. To be a pane the sun shines through.'⁶¹²

3.3.1.2. Mother

Mother is presented as the fearful Queen of a Deistic Female Power Regained. She has shaped her body according to her personal, extreme, hyperbolic view of radical feminism and femininity. This aspect expressed by Carter, meaning the

⁶¹⁰ Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter. "On the discursive limits of sex."* New York 38, 1993, p.125

⁶¹¹ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015., p.125

⁶¹² Ivi, p,134

caricatural representation of Beulah as a quasi-comical exasperation of radical feminism, has been misinterpreted by authors like Robert Clark, who recognises Carter's play with writing as «feminism in male chauvinist drag, a transvestite style», but fails to grasp Carter's satire and her elaborate construction of gender. Mother is also the founder of the underworld city of Beulah, a womb-like space which evokes the parthenogenetic policy on which Beulah is based. Her power is anticipated by the other Amazons living in Beulah, incarnating the «philosophy [which] has dominion over the rocks» of the desert in which the city lays, as the broken phallus column shows. Her mystical appearance nullifies her past; Mother, like Tristessa, has renounced her identity in order to become the monster she has shaped herself into through surgery. Observing Beulah, Evelyn notes:

Mother built this underground town, she burrowed it out below the sand; Holy Mother whose fingers are scalpels excavated the concentric descending spheres of Beulah, unless, that is, she herself has always been there – a chthonic deity, a presence always present in the shaping structure of dream. She is a holy woman, it is a profane place.⁶¹³

As we see, Mother and Beulah become a unique concept, an interchangeable symbology of the myth of motherhood and one of the representations of monstrous femininity. Mother's description is the triumph of excessive bodily materiality and grotesqueness, it is both a human and a divine body, and Evelyn is astonished by her monstrous, deformed, corporeal opulence:

Yet there it was, in person, the mystery, enshrined in an artificial grotto seated upon an everyday chair. [...] The girl Sophia kissed its forehead and gestured me to kneel. I knelt clumsily. I was appalled by the spectacle of the goddess. She was a sacred monster. She was personified and self-fulfilling fertility. Her head, with its handsome and austere mask teetering ponderously on the bull-like pillar of her neck, was as big and as black as Marx' head in Highgate Cemetery; her face had the stern, democratic beauty of a figure on a pediment in the provincial square of a people's republic and she wore a false beard of crisp, black curls like the false beard Queen Hatshepsut of the Two Kingdoms had worn. She was fully clothed in obscene nakedness; she was breasted like a sow – she possessed two tiers of nipples, the result [...] of a strenuous programme of grafting, so that, in theory, she could suckle four babies at one time. And how gigantic her limbs were! Her ponderous feet were heavy enough to serve as illustrations of gravity, her hands, the shape of giant fig leaves, lay at rest on the bolsters of her knees. Her skin, wrinkled like the skin of a black olive, rucked like a Greek peasant's goatskin bottle, looked as rich as though it might contain within itself the source of a marvellous, dark, revivifying river, as if

⁶¹³ Ivi, p.43

she herself were the only oasis in this desert and her crack the source of all the life-giving water in the world.

[...]

And in that belly, rich as a thousand harvests, there was no treacherous oblivion for me for, at birth, I'd lost all right of re-entry into the womb. I was exiled from Nirvana forever, and, faced with the concrete essence of woman, I was at my wit's end how to behave. I could not imagine what giant being might couple with her; she was a piece of pure nature, she was earth, she was fructification. [...] And she had made herself! Yes, made herself! She was her own mythological artefact; she had reconstructed her flesh painfully, with knives and with needles, into a transcendental form as an emblem, as an example, and flung a patchwork quilt stitched from her daughters' breasts over the cathedral of her interior, the cave within the cave.⁶¹⁴

The monstrous, grotesque essence of Mother derives not only from her magnificent, terrific body, which has Gargantuan proportions, but also from her incarnation of fertility that evokes the Rabelaisian grotesque power of regeneration and rebirth. At the same time, she is a self-made hybrid animal-human, Carter uses terms deriving from the animal world to describe her metamorphic, posthuman monstrosity. She has become, as we see, a symbol, a myth, and therefore her closed-circuit condition of crystallised, self-centered grotesqueness does not coincide with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque image of the grotesque as a changing process of corporeality. Thus, Mother is a hybrid even in her grotesque experience, halfway between a Medieval and a Romantic, individualistic grotesque. Although, at the end of the novel, she changes her condition, becoming a pitiful, old, lonely woman addicted to alcohol sitting on a bench, her grotesque evolution is not chatactic for herself, but it is rather a strategic revalidation of Mother as an essentialist simulacrum/simulation whom Eve now considers only an innocent void, a "figure of speech"⁶¹⁵

3.3.1.3. Zero and his wives

Zero, instead, is the perfect opposite of Mother. They both incarnate an essentialist view, Mother of femininity and Zero of masculinity, although in Zero's case there is no possibility of redemption for his character. Instead, he is fagocitated by his hatred for Tristessa and for the femininity that she symbolises. He is a misogynist, a homophobe, a rapist, a slaver and a manipulator. He

⁶¹⁴ Ivi, pp.56-57

⁶¹⁵ Ivi, p.180

inhabits the ghost city in the desert that Eve is brought to when she is abducted and this explains his misanthropy («Zero the poet adored the desert because he hated humanity.»⁶¹⁶ The physical description of him shows an association between his physical lack of one of his legs and his one eye with a limited perspective and a mutilated, limited experience of other lives. That is, a patriarchal and hierarchical perspective: «He had only the one eye and that was of an insatiable blue; he covered his empty socket with a black patch. He was one-legged, to match, and would poke his women with the artificial member when the mood took him.»⁶¹⁷

As already mentioned, Zero is sterile and unreasonably blames Tristessa for this sterility. Of course, even in this case, his sterility is a symbolic element of the character that Carter assigns to the patriarchal power and the misogyny that he represents. As Gamble explains, Zero, together with his ghost city, mirrors the situation of Mother to Beulah:

Under his savage rule, [Eve] is initiated into a womanly role which is the reversed mirror image of what Beulah has attempted to teach her, since Zero believes women are to be degraded and reviled, deprived of language, dignity and autonomy. Married to him, Eve is condemned to sterility and slavery, rather than to the fertile future promised to her by Mother.⁶¹⁸

Zero's wives are the Carterian epitome of Spivak's subaltern: they function in the novel only as instruments of legitimisation of power for Zero, they are deprived of names, dignity, beauty, hair, and even their incisor teeth so that they will not bite Zero during oral sex. They never express themselves with human words because Zero has obliged them to use only animal sounds to communicate. Nevertheless, they all adore Zero and recognise him as their master. When they express an opinion, their voice is usually essentialised by Eve in a collective «They told me», «They asked me», etc. Zero, on the contrary, considers them as inferior even to his own pigs: «Pigs were sacred to Zero.»⁶¹⁹ They are the result of the philosophical considerations that Zero has about

⁶¹⁶ Ivi, p.82

⁶¹⁷ Ibid.

⁶¹⁸ Gamble, Sarah, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line*. Edinburgh University Press, 1997., p.125

⁶¹⁹ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015., p.91

women, as the seven wives confess to Eve: «they told me how Zero believed women were fashioned of a different soul substance from men, a more primitive, animal stuff, and so did not need the paraphernalia of civilised society such as cutlery, meat, soap, shoes, etc., though, of course, he did.»⁶²⁰

3.3.2 Spaces of liminality and the poetics of geography in *The Passion of New Eve*

Eleonora Federici highlights the postmodern importance and intertextual play of spaces in Angela Carter's novels as sites of negotiation of social and identity balances. In this regard, Federici cites the example used by Brian McHale in *Postmodernist Fiction* of 'intertextual zones', i.e. «the disparate worlds that constitute the zone [which] occup[ies] different, incompatible spaces; as Foucault says, it is impossible to find any common locus beneath them»⁶²¹. In other words, these intertextual zones are used, as Federici reiterates, «as spaces in which the Dionysian and the carnivalesque emerge, giving life to a polyphonic and subversive tale»⁶²². It is precisely in such scenarios that the redefinition and metamorphosis takes place, not only of Carter's characters, their identities and how these are shaped by the spaces they inhabit, but also of the literary text itself. It undergoes that process of reconstruction and canonical and mythical de-idealisation from which the canon has benefited thanks to the Western cultural imagination, and which is subjected by Carter to a remixing, or bricolage (see Haffenden, 1985), or pastiche that is typical of postmodern aesthetics. The same concept of the 'Passion' coming from the Judaic-Biblical matrix associated with Eve being expelled from Eden is here transferred to the picaresque process experienced by the misogynist Evelyn who undergoes a surgical operation of sexual reassignment, and who is then pushed into the unexplored desert, a metaphor for her new identity to be reconstructed, and forced to live a parable of redemption in the first person. It should be specified that the parody of the biblical element in Carter does not have a desecrating function of the sacred texts, or at

⁶²⁰ Ivi, p.84

⁶²¹ McHale, Brian, *Postmodernist fiction*. Routledge, 2003., p. 56

⁶²² Federici, Eleonora, Riscrivere i testi sacri in chiave femminista: *The Passion of New Eve* di Angela Carter, *Between*, vol. VI, n. 12 (Novembre/ November 2016), p. 16

least not only that, but rather is aimed at assigning a new political and feminist guise to the canonical imagery from which it is inspired.

In Angela Carter's writing, hence, the settings of her stories contain a symbolic and political charge, that holds both a carnivalesque and strategical function based on her feminist deconstructive narrations, according to which the spaces are spaces of the reinforcement of difference but also areas of negotiation between the Other and the Self; or rather, as in the specific case of Evelyn's journey, where the monolithic self evolves and rises, while living the safespace of the city and embraces the unknown represented by the deserted lands of the United States. Carter's use of magical realism as her preferred style is due to her attempt, as Gamble explains, to maintain a situatedness from the places of marginality that has not only to be a temporary solution which does not only lasts during the moment of reading that leads the reader/writer to recognise her marginality as a reconstructed one. In other words, Carter believes that by uniting the fantastic with the real through her use of magical realism⁶²³ (a style that is shared by other international authors with the same intentions: Gabriel García Marquez, Isabel Allende, Salman Rushdie, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, Haruki Murakami, Arundhati Roy, Günter Grass, Irmtradud Morgner, etc.) she will apply a narrative strategy defined by Andrzej Gasiorek as "walking 'the tightrope between carnivalesque fantasy and rational critique'."⁶²⁴ Furthermore, Gamble gives a perfect description of the function of borderlands in Carter's writing and the role of the polarity of margin and center:

Too close to the centre, and one runs the danger of being claimed by it too far away, and one runs the risk of becoming an unheard voice crying in the metaphorical

⁶²³ Although it would be reductive to find a single definition of magical realism as a literary genre, it is to be considered here in relation to the discourse on contemporary literature and the postmodern usage of this definition, classifying a variety of worldwide literatures, and within the postcolonial context, that present some common narrative elements, such as the combination of surreal narrative expedients with given historical contexts. Wendy B. Faris in 2004 has contributed, with her 2004 study *Ordinary Enchantments - Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* to showing magical realism not only as a Latin American or postcolonial literary genre, but rather as an international attempt by both Western and postcolonial authors to erode "the dominance of Western post-Enlightenment rationality and the institution of literary realism". (Walker, Janet A. Rev. of *Ordinary Enchantments — Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* by Wendy B. Faris. *Comparative Literature Studies*. 44.4, 2007, pp. 510-514)

⁶²⁴ Gamble, Sarah, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line*. Edinburgh University Press, 1997., p.7

wilderness. Indeed, Carter's fictions are haunted by this fear, which is the fear of going too far, of losing touch with reality and disappearing completely into the world of the text or of performance. Deeper than that, it flirts with the fear of the loss of the independent, autonomous self who is capable of acting as historical or political agent within the empirical agent".⁶²⁵

These, as we saw and as we will see again with *Nights at the Circus*, are the fears shared by Evelyn, who travels through the desert to escape from the city and recognises that his travel is an acceptance of negotiation for his own identity. It is a fear shared also by Desiderio, the main character from *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffmann*, who travels to look for the powerful king of illusions, Dr. Hoffmann, and at the same time loses himself in a picaresque descent into surrealist visions.

In her demythologising mission, the classic, picaresque, male hero's journey is converted, in Carter's work, into an internal voyage at the world's end. Or it turns, as in the case of Fevvers from *Nights at the Circus*, to be a gradual, embodied distancing from the objectifying eye of society that establishes and overwrites monstrosity and difference on the female body. Therefore, as Sneja Gunew underlines, and as I have theorised in my first chapter, in Carter as well the margin is a space that the dominant center desires because

The textual productions of marginal minorities exist to confirm hegemonic textualities. And these minority writings have been in general homogenized as the area of plurality, disruption, closure, deterred meaning and process; in other words, as affirming the dynamism of the centre and its ability to accommodate change – change which is safely contained.⁶²⁶

The fantastic-political expedient of Carter of playing with speculative fiction and giving her characters (Eve and Fevvers) a first person narration, is an attempt to give voice to the self who is speaking from the margins, just as much as Mary Shelley does with the Creature from *Frankenstein* during his monologue at the Chamounix glacier; in both of these examples, it is the freak, the abjected character, who is freeing themselves from their ventriloquised, silenced condition, and who is narrating their open experience of monstrosity from the space of

⁶²⁵ Ibid.

⁶²⁶ Sneja Gunew in Gamble, Sarah, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Line*. Edinburgh University Press, 1997., p.6

otherness. Throughout this process, the boundaries between the so-called 'otherness' or 'abjection' are gradually blurred, as Gamble confirms while commenting Carter's 'domestic deconstruction', referring to a «series of rewritings of narratives of homeliness and domesticity» subverting the 'house' as the space of female isolation, and transforming it into a space where the female subjectivity is challenged to a becoming-process, as occurs in the eponymous tale from *The Bloody Chamber* collection, where the female, passive protagonist slowly acquires authority by transgressing the patriarchal domestic prohibitions of her Bluebeard-husband. By doing so, Carter explores the inner landscapes of the self-reflective female inhabitants of the house, demystifying the 'Angel of the House' figure.⁶²⁷

Similarly, as Wisker has observed, the refusal of a clear-cut distinction between an inside-world and outside-world, in other terms, the refusal of boundaries between margin and center, helps to recognise the Abject as a part of ourselves that the Western, patriarchal, normative culture has conceived in order to take distance from it. On the contrary, the recognition of the other as ourselves, as suggested by Kristeva in her *Strangers to Ourselves*, fulfills «an egalitarian mission by overcoming 'the need to find victims, scapegoats, and enemies'.»⁶²⁸

In her essay *Heterotopia in Angela Carter's Fiction: Worlds in Collision*, Eliza Claudia Filimon recovers the space of otherness as theorised by Michael Foucault, who coined the definition of 'heterotopia', and demonstrates how in Angela Carter's works the heroes and heroines inhabiting these spaces, that evade the normative socio-political sphere, pass from being 'othered' spaces into fields of empowerment, deconstruction of a normative self, and rejection of the patriarchal agenda. Sharing Arun Saldanha's thought on Foucault's *heterotopology*, Filimon considers the appliance of heterotopia to Carter's spaces

⁶²⁷ Gamble, Sarah, "'There's No Place Like Home': Angela Carter's Rewritings of the Domestic." *Literature Interpretation Theory* 17.3-4, 2006, pp. 277-300.

⁶²⁸ Kérchy, Anna, "Psychogeography in the curiosity cabinet: Angela Carter's poetics of space." in Mulvey-Roberts, Marie. *The arts of Angela Carter: A cabinet of curiosities*. Manchester University Press, 2019, p. 39.

as a process of «reciprocity, politics of boundaries, situatedness, multivocality.»⁶²⁹

I share Anna Kérchy's corporeal and narratological analysis of the space in Angela Carter, since the metamorphic process of the hero/ine in Carter's novel corresponds both to a symbolic, atmospherical realism and to an unstoppable self-decomposing travel. In *The Passion of New Eve*, the physical change and suffering that Eve and other characters, such as Tristessa and Leilah, experience through their body, provides also a parodistic, feminist revision of the picaresque hero's journey as an experience of myth's deconstruction, the passion of the new Eve from the title is in fact a journey to rebirth, where Eve abandons her male past and the artificial image that Evelyn had shaped on women as essentialist and misogynist concept, and where she acquires the opportunity of becoming a monstrous woman out of the consumerist, objectifying, "looksist" attention of normative society.⁶³⁰

The other interesting and subversive aspect of the correspondance between characters and spaces in *The Passion of New Eve* is that although there are solipsistic, non-mutable forms of Romantic grotesque characters such as Tristessa, Mother and Zero, this encounter is still a dialogic, carnivalesque experience of contradictory and contrasting (and sometimes antagonistic) voices that accomplish the Bakhtinian carnivalesque scope inside a scenario which is adequate for identity negotiation: the borderland.

According to Lizza Welby, the city and the desert are functioning in *The Passion of New Eve* as "gendered spaces". The reader, in fact, observes the parable of Evelyn leaving his precarious comfort zone of masculinity in New York City and prepares to cross the desert to encounter both Mother from Beulah and Zero from the harem, two polar extremities of femalehood and malehood. Carter, as Welby explains,

⁶²⁹ Filimon, Eliza Claudia, *Heterotopia in Angela Carter's Fiction: Worlds in Collision*. Anchor Academic Publishing (aap_verlag), 2014, p.24

⁶³⁰ Kérchy, Anna, *Bodies That Do Not Fit: Sexual Metamorphoses, Re-Embodied Identities and Cultural Crisis in Contemporary Transgender Memoirs*. Vol. 5. Peter Lang Verlag, 2009., p.1

exploits, subverts, and reverses both traditional nineteenth-century masculine images of urban, pastoral landscapes while simultaneously offering the reader her imaginative representation of those same spaces. On his way into the heart of darkness of gendered identity, Evelyn passes through three landscapes; the detritus-strewn entopic New York, the underground gynocratic Beulah-home to Carter's fleshy, multi-breasted phallic Mother and her acolytes-where his sexual transformation takes place, and a decaying mining town where the Calibanesque Zero fashioned a harem of outcast women who worship at his altar of his sexual impotence.⁶³¹

3.3.2.1. New York

I agree with Federici in seeing in the New York depicted by Carter an echo of post-apocalyptic London devastated by the plague in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*.⁶³² I also perceive references to other British and American authors of speculative fiction of that time, such as William S. Burroughs (*Naked Lunch*, 1959), Ursula K. Le Guin or Joanna Russ (*The Female Man*, 1975). What is more, in his biography on Angela Carter, *The Invention of Angela Carter*, Edmund Gordon evidences how Carter's representation of New York City as a dark, unsettling, chaotic place derives from a July, 1969 trip she took there, a crucial moment in the city's history, as Carter and her husband Paul

arrived in the aftermath of the Stonewall riots, when the city was fractious and twitchy in the midsummer heat. A few weeks earlier, the first American troops had withdrawn from Vietnam (an outcome which Angela thought was 'in human terms... the singlemost glorious event since the abolition of slavery'), but in August the headlines were dominated by gun battles between Black Panthers and police, the bombing of the Marine Midland building on Broadway by a radical left-wing activist, and the gruesome murders perpetrated by the

Manson family in Los Angeles and the Zodiac Killer in San Francisco. Angela felt that the status quo 'couldn't hold on much longer. The war had been brought home.' She found Manhattan 'a very, very strange and disturbing and unpleasant and violent and terrifying place... The number of people who offered to dome violence was extraordinary.'⁶³³

Gordon confirms how this experience of Carter's in Manhattan may have formed the basis for the setting of New York City in *The Passion of New Eve*. Moreover, it was during a visit to Max's Kansas City, a nightclub in the East Village, that

⁶³¹ Welby, Lizzy, "Abjected Landscapes: Crossing Psychogenic Borders in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*." *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 47.1, 2014, pp. 73-87., p.77

⁶³² Federici, Eleonora, *Riscrivere i testi sacri in chiave femminista: The Passion of New Eve di Angela Carter*, *Between*, vol. VI, n. 12 (Novembre/ November 2016), p. 8

⁶³³ Gordon, Edmund, *The Invention of Angela Carter*. Random House, 2016., p. 134

Carter met the drag queen who would serve as her inspiration for the character of Tristessa.

Hence, while London, the European city and once imperialistic centre of the world, is described by Evelyn as a decadent, nostalgic place, filled with the “sentimental queers” that crowd the late cinema shows to contemplate the camp image of Tristessa, New York distorts any expectation Evelyn had held of the city previously, which he had imagined as a patch work of his exotic, cinematic projection of it. «Nothing in my experience had prepared me for the city», he admits once arrived.⁶³⁴ In fact, the carnivalesque chaotic deconstruction of the self and the body starts within the chaos of New York City, a labyrinthine, decadent, dystopic place. As Nicoletta Vallorani states⁶³⁵, the liminality of the spaces in *The Passion of New Eve* has already started in New York, even before Evelyn's journey through the desert. It reflects the fragmentation and the chaotic, hybrid and desecrating mirroring and deterioration of postmodernism, while London, as seen, remains chained to a nostalgia and to a romantic process of fading. Even the colors of the sky evoke the psychedelic chaos that makes New York an indescribable maze of people, architecture, and decay:

The skies were of strange, bright, artificial colours – acid yellow, a certain bitter orange that looked as if it would taste of metal, a dreadful, sharp, pale, mineral green – lancinating shades that made the eye wince. From these unnatural skies fell rains of gelatinous matter, reeking of decay. One day, there was a rain of, I think, sulphur, that overcame in rottenness all the other stench of the streets. [...] The city was scribbled all over with graffiti in a hundred languages expressing a thousand griefs and lusts and furies and often I saw, in virulent dayglo red, the insignia of the angry women, the bared teeth in the female circle.⁶³⁶

Vallorani, then, quotes Walter Benjamin's definition of 'the work of art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' to describe New York's skyline, a “pure image, the side of a city, endlessly reproducing itself like a modern work of art”⁶³⁷ where “the negative perspectives of the skyscrapers” triumph.⁶³⁸ This postmodern, Babel-

⁶³⁴ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015., p.6

⁶³⁵ Vallorani, Nicoletta, "The Body of the City: Angela Carter's" *The Passion of the New Eve*." *Science Fiction Studies*, 1994, pp. 365-379.

⁶³⁶ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015., p.8

⁶³⁷ Vallorani, Nicoletta, "The Body of the City: Angela Carter's" *The Passion of the New Eve*." *Science Fiction Studies*, 1994, pp. 365-379., p.370

⁶³⁸ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*. Virago Press, London, 2015., p.19

like metropolis is depicted by Evelyn himself as an “alchemical city” where “chaos, dissolution, nigredo, night” are the dominant elements and where he already perceives the liminality that will corporeally involve him: «‘Chaos, the primordial substance,’ [...] ‘Chaos, the earliest state of disorganised creation, blindly impelled towards the creation of a new order of phenomena of hidden meanings. The fructifying chaos of anteriority, the state before the beginning of the beginning.’»⁶³⁹

3.3.2.2 Beulah

As a metaphor for the uterus, the labyrinthine, urban space of Beulah reflects the female body and its evasion from the patriarchal imagination. Beulah and Mother are interchangeable elements, both of them reflecting the pre-Oedipal experience and the male distinction between mind and body or between self and other. The space in Beulah, thus, is the reflection of a process of the rebuilding of female identity according to a new, autonomous, separatist experimental language that influences the physical space and those who inhabit it, in this case, Mother, her Amazons who mutilate their breasts as ritual, and finally Evelyn, who is turned into Eve. The creation of Beulah within an attempt of postmodern speculative fiction is an allusion by Carter to other examples of urban spaces with a gynocratic regime created by women, such as Whileaway from Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), Herland from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's eponymous novel (1915), or Mattaporset from Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976).

Beulah is a place belonging to William Blake's mythology, who describes it in his poem *Jerusalem, or the Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1804-1820). Blake not only describes Beulah as a place where the union of sexes are ideal and unrestricted, but he also mentions Beulah in the poem *Milton* (1810), where he defines Beulah as «a place where contraries are equally true», quite similarly to Evelyn's depiction of Beulah at the end of Chapter Five in *The Passion of New Eve*: «And here I am in Beulah, the place where contrarities exist together.»⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁹ Ivi, p.10

⁶⁴⁰ Ivi, p.45

This urbanistic “image of feminine society which exists only in male chauvinistic nightmares”,⁶⁴¹ as Robert Clark describes Beulah, is also developed in a opposite direction from the male urbanistic view. While, in fact, the phallic length of the skyscrapers wishes to evoke the male Priapic predominancy, Beulah conjures up images of the womb, its darkness and its emblematic association with the life-generating motherhood, female bodily fluids and all the slippery secretions of the female body. The triumphant symbol of the gynocratic power of Beulah is a broken phallus column that greets Evelyn upon his arrival to the town.⁶⁴² Even the corridors, descending in identical spirals, suggest their “elsewhere”, feminist architecture. The loudspeaker echoing in the air announces the city's essence:

‘Proposition one: time is a man, space is a woman.

Proposition two: time is a killer.

Proposition three: kill time and live forever.’⁶⁴³

Therefore, Beulah constitutes Evelyn’s physical access to a space where time is nullified and erased, and where his identity as a man will symbolically be killed. By becoming Eve, then, Evelyn will be transformed into an embodied space, and as such, into a territory of otherness incarnated; that is, the quintessential female monstrous.

3.3.2.3. Tristessa's Glass House

As Maria Pérez Gil notes, Tristessa's house made of mirrors is an emblem of Tristessa's idea of femininity, related to self-reflection, monolithic isolation within a simulacrum of femininity, passivity and suffering, typically associated with a languorous and romantic female performativity. While the absence of mirrors in Beulah reflects Mother's rejection of the objectification of femininity according to the male gaze, Tristessa's house has the opposite intention. According to the solitary diva, her existence depends on her artificial image, encaged in an immortal beauty. As Pérez Gil comments,

⁶⁴¹ Clark, Robert, "Angela Carter's Desire Machine." *Women's Studies*, 14:147-61, 1987., p.148

⁶⁴² Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*. Virago Press, London, 2015., p.51

⁶⁴³ Ivi, p.50

The glass house in which Tristessa lives is an emblem of her femininity: she is "a pane the sun shines through" (137), the mirror on which patriarchy projects its romantic notions concerning woman. Cinema, that arch-"Platonic shadow show" (110), presents Tristessa's eternal feminine as sermon to the masses. The hyperbolic womanhood (5) that she embodies is, however, just "dream" (7), "illusion" (110), "mystification" (6), and "visual fallacy" (147)⁶⁴⁴

The recognition of Tristessa as "Our Lady of Dissolution"⁶⁴⁵ is reflected by the gloomy atmosphere of her house in the desert, but the house also reflects the artificial image of the diva that is both a way to hide her void as a self-defined subject and the mirroring reproduction of the necrophiliac fantasies deriving from a male, essentialist, camp imagination. The eternal, unnatural beauty of Tristessa – she is a diva from the 1920's and the novel is presumably set in the 1970's- makes her a monster of beauty, an undead icon who «existed only by means of a massive effort of will and a huge suppression of fact.»⁶⁴⁶

The description of Tristessa's mausoleum filled with wax statues of deceased actors and divas from Hollywood, placed in grotesque poses confirms the fagocitating objectification of bodies within the show-business that in Tristessa's house appears as willingly exasperated and exaggerated, as a symbolic art exhibition of the triumph of the objectified image that rips off the identity of the subject-actors as their mutilated corpses-statues:

The corpse was not a corpse at all. It was a cunningly executed waxwork. We looked about us and found we were in an entire hall of waxworks, all in coffins, all with candles at their heads and feet. These waxworks were executed with great fidelity in the detail. The translucent fingernails had been inserted with meticulous precision; each hair stuck individually into the scalp; the curve of each nostril was as sweet and perfect as that of a petal. At an unspoken command of Zero's, I went around the coffins lighting every candle.⁶⁴⁷

Tristessa's mausoleum, then, is more similar to a cemetery of celebrities, and Tristessa is its caretaker. Not by chance, in fact, Carter cites the presence of celebrities who all met a tragic end:

⁶⁴⁴ Perez-Gil, Maria Del Mar, "The Alchemy of the Self in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*." *Studies in the Novel* 39.2, 2007, pp. 216-234., p.227

⁶⁴⁵ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015., p.15

⁶⁴⁶ Ivi, p.129

⁶⁴⁷ Ivi, p.114

Jean Harlow, in a clinging gown of white satin, lay beside James Dean, both of whom had died of fame; then I found Marilyn Monroe, stark naked, just as they found her on her death bed; and Sharon Tate, in a tide of golden hair, she, poor girl, stabbed to death by mad people; Ramon Navarro, beaten to death by intruders in his own home; Lupe Velez, died by her own hand; Valentino, consumption and loneliness; Maria Montez, boiled to death in her bath for vanity's sake; all the unfortunate dead of Hollywood lay here, with candles at their heads and feet and flowers on their still bosoms. The flowers, too, were made of wax.⁶⁴⁸

The fact that even Tristessa rests in a glass coffin re-confirms her self-perception (and and external one) as an immutable icon existing only through her necrophiliac fantasy and through her image as a fetishised icon. Just as Tristessa is defined by Eve as “a shrine of his own desires”, her/his house appears as “her glass shrine”, “her castle of purity, her ice palace”, that Tristessa herself calls 'THE HALL OF THE IMMORTALS'. When she sees Tristessa laying down in her coffin, Eve associates her with the myth of Sleeping Beauty:⁶⁴⁹ «She was a sleeping beauty who could never die since she had never lived. Even in death, she was enigmatic and let her corpse lie among ingenious simulacra of corpses.»⁶⁵⁰

As we saw with *The Lady of the House of Love*, both Tristessa's and Lady Nosferatu's images are trapped into their image which will end up with coinciding with their scope: to be the monstrous *femme fatale* relegated to her own fortress of solitude and melancholy.

3.4. The redemption of a bird-woman: grotesque, arealism and mockery in *Nights at the Circus*

As already anticipated, *Nights at the Circus* represents the highest evolution of the picaresque hero/ine in Carter's novels, and I argue that it is the first novel in Carter's production where a perfect correspondence and coexistence between the monstrous body and a revitalising, liberatory function of the Bakhtinian grotesque is shown. However, we must always consider that Carter's approach

⁶⁴⁸ Ivi, p.114

⁶⁴⁹ Notice how here the archetype of the sleeping beauty as monstrous figure of eternal beauty and passivity according to a male fantasy is presented again after *The Loves of Lady Purple* and how it will re-appear in Carter both in *The Lady of the House of Love* from *The Bloody Chamber* collection in 1979 and in her novel *Nights at the Circus*, from 1984.

⁶⁵⁰ Ivi, p.116

to literature and to literary criticism was a postmodernist, deconstructionist and demythologising one. This explains how even Carter's use of the grotesque has acquired a hybrid finality, both Medieval and Romantic, possessing both a revitalising and a tragic dimension, through characters who do not show their process of metamorphosis and who remain stuck to their self-reflective identities. These grotesque figures, differently from Fevvers, will collapse in front of the irreversible change that the spirit of Carter's 1984 novel, presented as a picaresque pastiche and feminist journey from Europe to Siberia, will suffer. As I have anticipated, Carter's usage of the carnivalesque from Bakhtin, as well as the Russian theorist's idea of the grotesque, encounters Carter's adoption of the grotesque as a demythologising, corporeal parable that sees in Fevvers its maximum representative subject.

In an interview with Lorna Sage, Carter expressed her initial skepticism about the renewalist function of the carnivalesque, as she viewed it as a transitory phase, rather than an irreversible modification within society: «The carnival» she said «has to stop. The whole point about the feast of the fools is that things went on as they did before, after it stopped».⁶⁵¹ For this reason, Carter's use of the carnivalesque allows her the possibility that the female monster can acquire a pivotal position, by giving her a voice and subverting the traditional dynamic of the male picaresque novel *à la* Fielding (such as *Tom Jones*, 1749). Thus, without establishing what is, according to Carter, the perfect, ideal image of a woman, she aims to show through Fevvers the qualities that a (post)modern subject should aim to have: «hubris, imagination and desire. As we are, ourselves; or, as we ought to be».⁶⁵² Paulina Palmer, as we saw, defines Fevvers as the apex of the Carterian parable that goes from the coded mannequin (presumably Lady Purple or even Marianne from Carter's 1969 novel, *The Magic Toyshop*) to the bird woman, as if it were a *fil-rouge* assigning meaning to the demythologising mission of Carter's writing. Notice also that 'coded mannequin' is an interchangeable term that fits perfectly within the Foucauldian idea of the 'docile body' (see Chapter 1) and which, in fact, corresponds to Hélène Cixous' metaphor

⁶⁵¹ Sage, Lorna, "interview with Angela Carter." *New Writing*, 1992, pp. 185-194., p.188

⁶⁵² Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., p.97

in *Sorties*, where the French feminist writer defines as 'coded mannequin' the 'robotic' status of those individuals -women- who are reduced to a condition of psychic repression. If we consider this reading of Carter's narrative a parable, we will recognise, as Nicoletta Caputo illustrates, a 'pars destruens' in Carter, that characterises her first short stories and novels until 1978, where Carter enacts her full demythologising mission, followed by a 'pars construens' period, after 1978 and from *The Bloody Chamber* on, marked by a utopistic, liberatory characterisation of female subjectivity.⁶⁵³ If Eve from *The Passion of New Eve* is the symbol of a fetishised violence applied onto a female body deprived of its own identity and authority, Fevvers is the picaresque epitome of an autonomous, emancipatory transgression.

As we will see, nevertheless, even Fevvers will attempt to free herself from the image of the 'Cockney Venus' that she herself has created, while adopting her own monstrous diversity of bird woman to become both an object of erotic exploitation through the normative yet deviating male gaze, and how this image of a sensual, gigantic, voluptuous aerialist slowly will leave the place to the creature under the mask. During her journey in Transbaikalia, in fact, and due to the misadventures of the circus team, Fevvers will no longer pay attention to all those aesthetic remedies that she adopted as performative rituals in front of the scrutinising male eye of the London public and, in particular, of Jack Walser, the journalist who has come into her boudoir to discover the truth about Fevvers' freakness: «is she fact or is she fiction?»⁶⁵⁴ To encourage this gradual abandonment of an artificial self-care, that it was probably functional to better hide Fevvers' situatedness within the category of the Abject more than into the category of the Self, it will be helpful to observe her picaresque condition of woman outside the center, London, and consider how she is when lost on the Russian steppe, away from the city that represents, here just as much as in *The Passion of New Eve* or in Shelley's *The Last Man*, the neuralgic centre of culture, economy and, to an extent, a normative categorisation of humanity.

⁶⁵³ Caputo, Nicoletta, 'New Wine in Old Bottles'. *Il bricolage intellettuale di Angela Carter in "Nights at the Circus"*. Vol. 1. Bibliotheca Aretina, 2010., p.106

⁶⁵⁴ Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., p.7

Differently from Tristessa, Fevvers recognises that, in Sarah Gamble's words, «[th]ere comes a point [...] when the performance has to end, and the notion of being nothing more than the sum of your performance, a view by which Carter's fiction was once seduced, is now regarded as a threat»⁶⁵⁵ In other terms, Fevvers is the scapegoat of Carter's paradigmatic heroine, who consciously accepts the materiality of her body and the subversive condition of her monstrous subalternity. Nevertheless, she accepts the risk of being the New Woman, but also remains «a fabulous creature who still has a few tricks up her sleeve, as her final triumphant assertion to [Walser], 'Gawd, I fooled you!' demonstrates».⁶⁵⁶

As Cixous shows in her famous manifesto *The Laugh of Medusa*, the female monster's laughter, as well as the Bakhtinian grotesque laughter, is charged with a regenerative power, since the role of Medusa, and by extent of the female monster, is to «blow up the law, to break up the truth»⁶⁵⁷ By doing so, Fevvers confirms herself as the New Woman that her first foster mother, Ma Nelson, ominously anticipated: «the pure child of the century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no woman will be bound down to the ground».⁶⁵⁸ Fevvers' capability to fly, thanks to her monstrous hybridism, provides her with an empowering skill: the control of air, fulfilling the utopian myth of the winged woman that Cixous celebrates in *The Laugh of Medusa*, and that Mary Russo defines as the female activity allowing the female freak-performer to obtain a space of her own, one which is even hierarchically and physically superior to the position of the male spectator, who is attending the night at the circus only to partake in her freakness. In this way, Fevvers survives while preserving her condition of physical paradox, half-monster and half-mockery, «an object of the most dubious kind of reality to her beholders... who looks like a hallucination but is not».⁶⁵⁹

⁶⁵⁵ Gamble, Sarah, *Angela Carter: Writing from the Front Wind*. Edinburgh University Press, 1997., p.166

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁷ Cixous, Hélène, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, "The laugh of the Medusa." *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society* 1.4, 1976, pp. 875-893., p.888

⁶⁵⁸ Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., p.25

⁶⁵⁹ Ivi, p.290

It is through this usage of her hybrid condition of monster and trick that Fevvers' art of flying acquires the empowering meaning that Cixous assigns to the French word "voler", both meaning "to fly" and "to steal":

Flying is woman's gesture-flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we've been able to possess anything only by flying; we've lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It's no accident that voler has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers just as robbers take after women and birds. They go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down.⁶⁶⁰

Therefore, this would contextualise the Sadeian dichotomy investigated by Carter in *The Sadeian Woman* and validate Fevvers' exploitation of those survival strategies, whereas in the patriarchal, objectifying world, Juliette and Justine from De Sade's narrative would become opposite polarities: «Justine is the thesis, Juliette the antithesis; both are without hope and neither pays any need to a future in which might lie the possibility of a synthesis of their modes of being».⁶⁶¹ Fevvers' ambiguity towards surviving by adopting those greedy and individualistic mechanisms of the male, objectifying world makes her a character which fits more with Juliette's personality than with Justine's. As Carter writes in *The Sadeian Woman*, Juliette is «a figure of whom minds have as yet no conception, who is rising out of mankind, and will have wings and who will renew the world».⁶⁶² Nevertheless, the problematic position of Fevvers/Juliette is the use of herself as producer of a spectacle for a male, fetishistic consumerism. We must not forget that, although proclaimed the 'Helen of the High Wire' and 'Cockney Venus', Fevvers is a freak, and she is seen as such by the public eye and within normative male society. The latter shows interest in her only because of her double abjection: as a sexual object and as a bird woman, as we clearly understand from the beginning: «So, on the street, at the soirée, at lunch in expensive restaurants with dukes, princes, captains of industry and punters of like Kidney, she was

⁶⁶⁰ Cixous, Hélène, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen, "The laugh of the Medusa." *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society* 1.4, 1976, pp. 875-893., p.887

⁶⁶¹ Carter, Angela, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, Virago, 2006, p. 79

⁶⁶² Ibid.

always the cripple, even if she always drew the eye and people stood on chairs to see». ⁶⁶³

Even her identification as an allegory of Cupid or Winged Victory, as well as the male fetishistic fantasies of her perpetrated by Mr. Rosencreuntz, who wishes to kill her because he considers Fevvers as the Angel of Death, Azrael, or the Grand Duke, who creates an ice statue of Fevvers and wishes to shrink her and enclose her into a Fabergé egg, all of practices reconfirm Fevvers' embodied monstrosity. They also end up confirming Russo's statement that «if Juliette is a New Woman, [as Fevvers is too] she is a New Woman in the model of irony». ⁶⁶⁴ Russo, from this perspective, contextualises Ma Nelson's definition of Fevvers as “the pure child of the New Age” under an ironic and exploitative key of analysis, whereas she will pass from performing Cupid in the whorehouse to perform the “Winged Victory”, that is the II century B.C. Statue of the Nike of Samothrace, and this will lead Fevvers to take advantage of her monstrosity while becoming an objectified Winged Victory and being celebrated worldwide as a “tableau vivant for male visitors”, as much in the whorehouse as in the circus scenario. ⁶⁶⁵ The major difference between Eve and Fevvers is Fevvers' acknowledgement that there is no “naturalness” in being a woman, and she accepts the compromise of objectification. Even this choice, which represents Fevvers' initial status in the novel, will evolve and let Fevvers negotiate with her own self in the heterotopic space of Siberia, away from the spectacle society of London. Here, in fact, Fevvers acknowledges her vulnerable monstrosity: «The Cockney Venus! She thought bitterly. Now she looks more like one of the ruins that Cromwell knocked about a bit. Helen, formerly of the High-Wire, now permanently grounded. Pity the New Woman if she turns out to be as easily demolished as me.» ⁶⁶⁶ Even her body shows the illusion of her artificial, gigantic beauty sold in shows once in London: her hair regrowth shows her original, dark hair colour hidden by her bleached blond hair; her feathers, which she used to paint with vivid colours, are fading, revealing their original, pallid yellow; one of her wings has broken during

⁶⁶³ Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., p.19

⁶⁶⁴ Russo, Mary, *The female grotesque: risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge, 2012., p.165

⁶⁶⁵ Ivi, p.167

⁶⁶⁶ Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., p.273

a train accident, impeding her from flying: she is, then, a romantic, solipsistic representation of the grotesque female monster that embodies the failure of her performance: «every day, the tropic bird looked more and more like the London sparrow as which it had started out in life, as if a spell were unravelling.»⁶⁶⁷

In *Nights at the Circus*, the characters that experience an evolution through their journey, including Fevvers, change through a Carterian revitalising and emancipatory image of love. As in *The Passion of New Eve*, it was Eve herself who recognised at the end of her cyclical travel through the deserted space that «The vengeance of sex is love»,⁶⁶⁸ in *Nights at the Circus* Fevvers also arrives at the deconstruction of her artificial image of pin-up/aerialist in a borderland space, by realising her love for Jack Walsler. Even Carter, in *The Sadeian Woman*, remarks on the changing power of love that can turn into a driving force for emancipation: «It is in this holy terror of love that we find, in both men and women themselves, the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women».⁶⁶⁹ This evolution passes through Fevvers' own body that experiences a physical metamorphosis, pushing her to question her own identity as half-woman and half-bird. This transformation process and the fantastic hybridity that characterise Fevvers contribute to placing her within the borderland between real and fictional, as well as on the natural and supernatural/artificial one. She is both animal and human, and this demonstrates an intrinsic irreconcilability within her persona.

As Magali C. Michael recognises in her study of *Nights at the Circus*, «[a]s a fantastic and indeterminate being, Fevvers can never be pinned down as subject; her status is always in the process of becoming other than itself. Her identity is unstable, since she is the site of apparent contradictions: woman and bird, virgin and whore, fact and fiction, subject and object»⁶⁷⁰

Furthermore, Fevvers is a monster charged with the innovative and counternarrative power assigned by Linda Hutcheon to the historiographic metafiction, while questioning historical veracity through the historical accuracy

⁶⁶⁷ Ivi, p.171

⁶⁶⁸ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015., p.187

⁶⁶⁹ Carter, Angela, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History*, Virago, 2006, p. 150

⁶⁷⁰ Michael, Magali Cornier, and Angela Carter. "Angela Carter's "Nights at the Circus:" An Engaged Feminism via Subversive Postmodern Strategies." *Contemporary Literature* 35.3, 1994, pp. 492-521., p.509

in Carter's novel's representation of the social and cultural scenario of a *fin-de-siècle* London. By contrast, Fevvers' voice is seen by critics as a 20th century female voice, because Fevvers' attitude and freedom of choice are interpreted by Vallorani and Pasolini as the consequence of the philosophical evolution and the feminist revolutions occurring in 1960's and 1970's; thus, as Helen Stoddard observes, *Nights at the Circus* is «just as much a novel about Britain in the 1980s». ⁶⁷¹ This evolution, finally, charges Fevvers's voice with a specific weight, because she passes from being a spectacular monstrosity relegated to the late 19th century London's freakshow to the condition of female counternarrative, non-normative subject, whose narrating voice and non-normative corporeality acquire an empowering validity. It is her voice that leads the narration from the beginning: during the recounting of Fevvers' life to Walser in the first section of the novel, 'London', is filtered by her own reconstruction of the events that mark her biography, including her monstrous birth from a swan egg, her discovery of flying and her teenage years at the whorehouse. Walser himself is seduced by her voice, that Carter describes as it follows:

Her voice. It was as if Walser had become a prisoner of her voice, her cavernous, sombre voice, a voice made for shouting about the tempest, her voice of a celestial fishwife. Musical as it strangely was, yet not a voice for singing with; it comprised discords, her scale contained twelve tones. Her voice, with its warped, homely, Cockney vowels and random aspirates. Her dark, rusty, dipping, swooping voice, imperious as a siren's.

Yet such a voice could almost have had its source, not within her throat but in some ingenious mechanism or other behind the canvas screen, voice of a fake medium at a séance. ⁶⁷²

Even Fevvers' voice, then, acquires a monstrous, multifaceted and quasi-mystical dimension, and this versatile, metamorphic power of the voice of the bird-woman gains an even more interesting power once she becomes the representative voice of the silenced, double-abjected category of women and monsters. As Vallorani and Pasolini argue:

⁶⁷¹ Stoddard, Helen, "Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, A Routledge Study Guide.", 2007., p.8

⁶⁷² Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., p.47

Ancor più interessante, però, è il fatto che Fevvers presti la propria voce (o comunque il proprio punto di vista) al racconto delle storie di altri personaggi secondari, che grazie a questo spazio acquisiscono visibilità e prendono corpo uscendo dai margini dell'invisibilità a cui erano stati relegati dal discorso ufficiale. È il caso, ad esempio, delle donne scherzo-della-natura rinchiusi nel museo degli orrori di Madame Schreck, della domatrice di tigri Princess of Abyssinia, di Mignon, fragile e diafana come un fantasma ma dalla voce portentosa, delle prigioniere del Panopticon della Contessa P., e via discorrendo.⁶⁷³

An emblematic example of the voice of the female subaltern monster who recovers subjectivity is the character of the Sleeping Beauty, whose traditional, necrophiliac passivity with whom Carter had played before both in the case of Lady Nosferatu and Tristessa, is here explained as a parallel life that Sleeping Beauty experiences in dreams, that gradually take her away from the physical, awake world of experience:

it seems as if her dreams grow more urgent and intense, as if the life she leads in the closed world of dreams is now about to possess her utterly, as if her small, increasingly reluctant awakenings were an interruption of some more vital existence, so she is loath to spend even those few necessary moments of wakefulness with us, wakings strange as her sleepings. Her marvellous fate -- a sleep more lifelike than the living, a dream which consumes the world.⁶⁷⁴

In other words, by giving visibility to other subaltern and marginalised experiences with her voice, Fevvers perpetrates the decentering practice of empowerment that Hutcheon assigns to historiographic metafiction, as Fevvers «straddles the borders between the imaginary/fantastic [...] and the realistic/historical, between a unified biographically structured plot, and a decentered narration, with its wandering point of view and extensive digressions.»⁶⁷⁵

3.4.1. The picaresque and Gothic pastiche from *Nights at the Circus*: synopsis of a counternarrative

⁶⁷³ "Even more interesting, however, is the fact that Fevvers lends his own voice (or at least her own point of view) to the telling of the stories of other secondary characters who, thanks to this space, acquire visibility and take shape, emerging from the margins of invisibility to which they had been relegated by the official discourse. This is the case, for example, of the freak-women locked up in Madame Schreck's horror mausoleum, of the tiger tamer Princess of Abyssinia, of Mignon, fragile and diaphanous like a ghost but with a powerful voice, of the prisoners of Countess P.'s Panopticon, and so on." [my translation] in Pasolini, Anna, and Nicoletta Vallorani. *Corpi magici: Scritture incarnate dal fantastico alla fantascienza*. Mimesis, 2020., p.33

⁶⁷⁴ Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., p.100

⁶⁷⁵ Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction*, Routledge, 1988, p.61

First published in 1984, *Nights at the Circus* was a finalist at the Man Booker Prize, and the winner of the 1984 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction. The story is divided into three sections: London, Petersburg, and Siberia, and it is evident how the picaresque identitary journey is moving from a Eurocentric, Londoner scenario, to a quasi-deserted, borderland space like that of the Transbaikalia territory, which represents here a geographic and cultural margin opposed to Western civilisation. It is Carter herself who recognises the ensemble of both Gothic and picaresque genres from the novel in her interview with Haffenden, demonstrating how the novel turns more picaresque-like especially in its second and third sections. This is seen plainly, when the main (and only) normative character from the novel, the American journalist Jack Walser, representing the Western, sceptical and scrutinising male gaze, joins the circus and attempts to discover the truth about Fevvers' monstrosity.⁶⁷⁶ Of course, Carter's use of these two literary genres, is functional to her work to subvert the literary canon and the traditional schemes of cultural representation.

The principle of the Gothic, the incalculability of time,⁶⁷⁷ is perfectly expressed in Fevvers' dressing room at the Alhambra theatre, during her interview-recount with Walser, and where Big Ben stops at midnight, altering Walser's rational perception of time. The symbolic importance of twelve o'clock is revindicated even in Ma Nelson's brothel, as «the dead centre of the day or night, the shadowless hour, the hour of vision and revelation, the still hour in the centre of the storm of time». ⁶⁷⁸ Fevvers, together with her stepmother and former fellow prostitute, Lizzy, tells the story of her eccentric birth, of her being found in a basket by Ma Nelson's prostitutes, who adopt her as a child and later, while growing up, Fevvers reveals herself to be a winged girl. She will become, thus, an allegory of Cupid and of the Winged Victory in Ma Nelson's brothel, and learns to fly with Lizzy's help. When Ma Nelson is tragically killed in a carriage accident, the prostitutes refuse to accept the destiny of the brothel, which is to be inherited by Nelson's brother, a pious man, and burn the brothel down. With this begins the Gothic plotline of the first section, when Fevvers and Lizzy move to the insidious

⁶⁷⁶ Haffenden, John, *Novelists in interview*. Routledge, 2019.

⁶⁷⁷ Belli, Mirella, *Il gotico inglese*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1986, p.30

⁶⁷⁸ Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., p.29

Madame Schreck's brothel. This place, quite different from Nelson's brothel, has both grotesque and Gothic characteristics. The major, sinister aspect is Schreck's museum/crypt (a typical feature of the Gothic fiction), called the 'Down Below' or 'the Abyss', and where Schreck brings the brothel's male clients «like Virgil in Hell, with her little Dante trotting after».⁶⁷⁹ The 'Down Below' crypt is a mausoleum of monstrous women-objects, like Sleeping Beauty, Albert/Albertina (a hermaphrodite prostitute and probably a reference to Albertina Hoffmann from Carter's 1972 novel *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffmann*) and where the freak-prostitutes are disposed as «in a series of tableaux.»⁶⁸⁰ In this male, voyeuristic, panoptical space

[t]he girls was all made to stand in stone niches cut out of the slimy walls, except for the Sleeping Beauty, who remained prone, since proneness was her specialty. And there were little curtains in front and, in front of the curtains, a little lamp burning. These were her 'profane altars', as she used to call them. "Some gent would knock at the front door, thumpety-thump, a soft, deathly thunder due to that crepe muffler on the knocker."⁶⁸¹

After Madame Schreck, another Gothic character, Mr. Rosencreutz, is introduced. It is possible to interpret him as a parodistic representation of the male villain from the British female Gothic; he is, in fact, an occultist who sees in Fevvers the reincarnation of Azrael, and wishes to sacrifice her in order to obtain eternal life. Even here, Carter mocks the figure of the persecuted maiden from the Gothic tradition and gives to Fevvers' rupture by Rosencreutz a "comic opera" tone.⁶⁸² Once free from Rosencreutz's ambitions, Fevvers returns to Lizzie's and soon after, they join Colonel Kearney's circus company, where Fevvers becomes a famous arealiste. At the end of section one, Walser is so unsatisfied with his doubts about Fevvers («is she fact or is she fiction?») that he decides to join the circus as a clown to follow her.

In the Petersburg section, Walser and the reader are introduced to other characters from the circus, such as the greedy Colonel Kearney and his

⁶⁷⁹ Ivi, p.62

⁶⁸⁰ Ivi, p.61

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ivi, p.73

clairvoyant pig, Sybil (reference to the Sibyl Cuman from Latin culture); Mignon, a young German girl married to the Giant Man, who Walser saves from a tiger's attack; the Princess of Abyssinia who tames tigers; and the clowns, an epitomising expression of the Bakhtinian Romantic grotesque, who are led by the figure of Buffo, a Christ-like clown who explains to Walser the philosophy behind being a clown. Here Fevvers, jealous of Mignon, who she believes is Walser's new lover, and having discovered that she herself is in love with Walser, is invited by a Russian Grand Duke to dinner, even though she visits him mainly because of the socio-economic advantages she hopes to gain at this meeting. Once again, the position of the persecuted maiden is mocked by Fevvers'/Juliette's greed. The Grand Duke, in fact, reveals himself to be a dangerous man who wants to transform her into a Fabergé egg. She manages to escape, once again by herself, and reaches the circus train destined to Siberia before it leaves the platform.

In the third and final section, Siberia, the fantastic-picaresque plotline has put under the control, with the circus train derailed and the company dismantled. Walser is lost, and then, now an amnesiac, is rescued by a group of female runaway outlaws that have left a Panoptical prison controlled by an all-dominating-eye countess. He is then put under the control of a shaman, who takes care of him. Fevvers and Lizzie, in the meantime, having more and more conflict because of Fevvers' determination to find Walser, reach with the rest of the circus company a village where they meet a piano teacher, called 'the Maestro', who adopts Mignon and Abyssinia, who have become lovers, and who are both platonically loved by Samson. Fevvers realises her condition of artificial performer who has renounced embracing her hybridity as an evolving difference.

Therefore, she considers with Lizzie how her relationship with Walser could finally represent an egalitarian, non-hierarchical union between a male and female lover:

As if a girl could mould him any way she wanted. Surely he'll have the decency to give himself to me, when we meet again, not expect the vice versa! Let him hand himself over into my safekeeping, and I will transform him. You said yourself he was unhatched, Lizzie; very well -- I'll sit on him, I'll hatch him out, I'll make a new man of

him. I'll make him into the New Man, in fact, fitting mate for the New Woman, and onward we'll march hand in hand into the New Century --"⁶⁸³

It is interesting how Fevvers, within a meta-literary experiment, interrogates herself about her condition as monster and picaresque heroine:

Young as I am, it's been a picaresque life; will there be no end to it? Is my fate to be a female Quixote, with Liz my Sancho Panza? If so, what of the young American? Will he turn out to be the beautiful illusion, the Dulcinea of that sentimentality for which Liz upbraids me, telling me it's but the obverse to my enthusiasm for hard cash?⁶⁸⁴

In her soliloquy, Fevvers confirms the reversal by Angela Carter of the picaresque hero's condition, where Fevvers is the one who really experiences an effective and radical change on her own identity, and stands in an active condition in front of Walser, who, in the meantime, has lost his memory by means of Fevvers herself. She becomes his saviour, and reconciles with him in a cathartic, triumphant coitus suspended in the air, where Fevvers reveals him her authenticity as a female monster, and where she physically establishes her superiority over him. As Caputo explains, the physical dominion by Fevvers implies her psychological autonomy from him, since, as Walser admits, «in [Fevvers'] hands he was putty since the first moment he saw her».⁶⁸⁵

I find it significant to recall, moreover, that just as *The Passion of New Eve* was inspired by the American cultural and political waves of the 1970s, so *Nights at the Circus* can be considered, as Sherley Peterson also states, as a product conceived during an era of repression and conservative obscurantism, as were the years of Margaret Thatcher's rule. The British intelligentsia, which saw in the Iron Lady's decade of rule the gradual erosion of civil liberties and thought, was united in representing the British leader as a grotesque caricature of right-wing tyrannical supremacy. Salman Rushdie, in his controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) spoke of Thatcher as 'Mrs Torture', who uses the police to torture black and Asian prisoners and make them eat excrement. At the same time, Rushdie as well as Angela Carter and other British authors, such as Ian McEwan,

⁶⁸³ Ivi, p.281

⁶⁸⁴ Ivi, p.245

⁶⁸⁵ Ivi, p.294

Margaret Drabble, Germaine Greer, Marianne Wiggins, took part in the summer of 1988 in the group founded by the historian Antonia Fraser and her husband, the playwright and 2005 Nobel Prize winner for Literature Harold Pinter, which took the name of 20 June Group. The group's intentions also included collectively coalescing against representatives of the literary right, such as Philip Larkin, who supported Thatcher's policies and glorified her image. Carter, specifically, in an article published in the *New Statesman* on 3 June 1983, speaks of Thatcher's voice and its almost monstrous manipulative power, stating:

Of all the elements combined in the complex of signs labelled Margaret Thatcher, it is her voice that sums up the ambiguity of the entire construct. She coos like a dove, hisses like a serpent, bays like a hound [in a contrived upper-class accent] reminiscent not of real toffs but of Wodehouse aunts.⁶⁸⁶

Critics have frequently attempted to identify parallels between the figure of Fevvers and the image of Margaret Thatcher, especially in the aspects that refer to aggressive capitalism and in the popular consensus with which the image of Fevvers was received in a fin-de-siècle London. As Helen Stoddart suggests,

Like Fevvers, Thatcher combined a thirst for elevation, status and fortune with a powerful populism [and] Fevvers, like Margaret Thatcher, is a self-promoting individualist, who emphasises the importance of hard work and self-help, always with an eye on the main chance when it comes to national and international money-making opportunities.⁶⁸⁷

At the same time, Stoddart's remark could suggest that Fevvers becomes a free subject when, far from populism and the objectifying eye of Victorian society that Fevvers bewitches and conquers, she reconstructs herself from her own personal vision of freakness, woman, bird and monster, and repudiating the use Fevvers had made of her own image as a monstrous woman up to that point. Fevvers' liberation from the populist logic of consensus can therefore be interpreted as Carter's clear-cut stand against the individualist and right-wing conservative and privileged policies legitimised by Thatcher's government.

⁶⁸⁶ Angela Carter, *The New Statesman*, 3 June 1983

⁶⁸⁷ Stoddart, Helen. *Angela Carter's Nights at the Circus: A Routledge Study Guide*. Routledge, 2007, pp. 8-9

3.4.2. Grotesque characters from *Nights at the Circus*

With a powerful expression, Anna Kérchy describes *Nights at the Circus* as a “carnavalesque Histrionic Hysterical Text”.⁶⁸⁸ The reason for her strong words is due to the subversive power with which Fevvers, the monstrous-grotesque female protagonist, possesses. Fevvers, in fact, does not correspond to the subordinate, silenced model of femininity which was especially ideal in Victorian society (the novel is set in 1899). Fevvers is an hyperbolic representation of the Victorian New Woman, «who refused to be silenced through reviving a stereotypical trope of the woman writer (much more dangerous than the submissive angel and her silly text): that of the 'madwomanwriter' speaking in subversive (m)other-tongues.»⁶⁸⁹ Kérchy recalls the pathologising tendency of patriarchy to consider a female narration, or, in other terms, a female voice, as impossible to be interpreted as an independent form of self-expression, becoming thus a 'somatised body'; namely, a female and defective corporeality. As Kérchy explains,

The hysteric body-text—along with the considerable corpus of ‘feminine’ writings affiliated with it—is primarily associated with the abjectified subject’s uncontrollable bodyliness troubled by its ‘wandering womb’ (‘hyster’ or ‘uterus’ constituting the etymological root of the word ‘hysteria’), its repressed yet re-emerging libidinal drives and excessive desires, resulting in indecipherable delirious ravings, irrational frenzies, phobic or phantasmatic association streams unable to ‘mature into’ symbolic representation.⁶⁹⁰

If considered in her full potentiality of self-determining corporeality, voice, and authority, Fevvers represents the hyperbolic hysteric female monster who is impossible to control. Walser, who wants to discover the secret or the truth about her irrational and non-human monstrosity, represents the male psychoanalytic agent who aims to 'heal' her in a “meaning-fixation” process, while “unveil[ing], objectify[ing], read[ing] and eras[ing]” her difference, in order to transform Fevvers into a socially functional female body destined to 'real' womanliness and silence.⁶⁹¹ Walser's narrative path, under this perspective, is quite similar to Evelyn's from *The Passion of New Eve*: while, in fact, Fevvers experiences an

⁶⁸⁸ Kérchy, Anna, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic Point of View*. Edwin Mellen Press, 2008., p.175

⁶⁸⁹ *Ivi*, p.177

⁶⁹⁰ *Ivi*, p.175

⁶⁹¹ *Ibid*.

evolution and deconstructs her artificial normativity, Walser is the white normative male, self-confident and nonetheless, erased after his amnesiac accident and his experience as a marginal being among the other marginalised identities of the circus.

Walser will only be able to look within himself after all of his experiences, after being saved by the Shaman; in fact he passes from, late-19th century Northern American capitalist society to London imperialism, where he works as a journalist (an 'objectifying' work of analysis), and deconstructs himself after his 'tabula erasa' (referring to *The Passion of New Eve*, p.79)⁶⁹², revelation across the borderland territory of Siberia and Transbaikalia: As a result, then: «So Walser acquired an "inner life", a realm of speculation and surmise within himself that was entirely his own. If, before he set out with the circus in pursuit of the bird-woman, he had been like a house to let, furnished, now he was tenanted at last[...].»⁶⁹³

As in the case of *The Passion of New Eve*, we can observe elements of both a Romantic and a Medieval Bakhtinian grotesqueness, used by Carter through her deconstructive and postmodern lens, that leads her to join together images of monstrous corporeality by analogy and by contrast.

3.4.2.1 Fevvers

Fevvers acquires a canonically carnivalesque and revitalising grotesque authority from the very beginning of Carter's novel. In *Rabelais and His World*, as we saw, Bakhtin depicts the becoming process of the material grotesque as a becoming body never defined, constantly constructing itself and at the same time deconstructing itself. Apart from that, Fevvers is a devouring, Gargantuan figure, who burps, farts, yells and blows her nose with her fingers evoking disgust. At the same time, she is charged with an angelical, quasi-mystical connotation due to her wings, she can be erudite, and is able to express herself through political and philosophical references («This is some kind of heretical possibly Manichean

⁶⁹² In *Nights at the Circus*, Walser is described as "a perfect blank", from *Nights at the Circus*, p.222

⁶⁹³ Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., pp. 260-261

version of Neo-Platonic Rosicrucianism»⁶⁹⁴ Her appetite results explicitly Rabelaisian in Carter's description, as she uses the word "gargantuan" while describing Fevvers' dinner:

her mouth was too full for a riposte as she tucked into this earthiest, coarsest cabbies' fare with gargantuan enthusiasm. She gorged, she stuffed herself, she spilled gravy on herself, she sucked up peas from the knife; she had a gullet to match her size and table manners of the Elizabethan variety. Impressed, Walser waited with the stubborn docility of his profession until at last her enormous appetite was satisfied; she wiped her lips on her sleeve and belched..⁶⁹⁵

Fevvers is the Rabelaisian dual body that synthesises the lower and the higher, as it also criticises, through her material, excessive embodiment, male voyeuristic objectification, and completely rejects the representation of the female body as a «reassuring fetish object for masculinist reason».⁶⁹⁶ The ontology of the male gaze is openly parodied by Fevvers' performance, which stresses Walser's role as an observer and destroys the function of objective, rational and analytical objectification of the female-monster-as-performer once she is able to play with time during her aerial performance, forcing Walser wonder to himself yet again whether Fevvers is a fact or a fiction.

Another element of Fevvers' grotesqueness that turns into a feminist tool of empowerment is her laughter. In Bakhtin, laughter acquires a universalistic power of renewal, the world as it seems becomes comical and at the same time sarcastic, mocking the hierarchies of power: «Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people», Bakhtin explains:

Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope: it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.⁶⁹⁷

The carnivalesque atmosphere created by Carter is explicitly mentioned as

⁶⁹⁴ Ivi, p. 77

⁶⁹⁵ Ivi, p.22

⁶⁹⁶ O'Brien, Wendy, "Feminine freakishness: carnivalesque bodies in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*." *Genders* 44, 2006.

⁶⁹⁷ Bakhtin, Mikhail Mikhaïlovich, and Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and his world*. Vol. 341. Indiana University Press, 1984., p.12

“carnival-like proceedings”, and Fevvers' final laughter really does bury and revives everything:

The spiralling tornado of Fevvers' laughter began to twist and shudder across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing.⁶⁹⁸

Fevvers' final laughter is her reaction to Walser's acknowledgment that she has no navel, which would confirm Fevvers' birth from an egg, and thus the authenticity of her monstrosity, as the oviparous have no umbilical cord. However, Fevvers' laughter has to be interpreted here as an umpteenth mockery by Fevvers of the rationalist male gaze. It is Medusa's laughter described by Cixous, that defeats the power of patriarchy and enjoys her carnivalesque, revitalising and triumphant new position as female subject. The resistance of the female corporeality against the male discourse is expressed by the excessive laughter of the female monster, namely, Fevvers/Medusa, described by Cixous as a moment of re-appropriation of the female body and identity by means of laughter:

«Our glances, our smiles, are spent; laughs exude from all our mouths; our blood flows and we extend ourselves without ever reaching an end; we never hold back our thoughts, our signs, our writing; and we're not afraid of lacking.»⁶⁹⁹

Fevvers, therefore, can be read as another expression of that female repressed monstrosity incarnated by that female corpse, like the potential wife of Frankenstein's monster, that Victor dismembers in the secrecy of his laboratory, as he is afraid of her power. Victor is, by doing so, dismembering the possibility of the female monster to escape from the scientist's, patriarchal, objectifying gaze, the same objectifying gaze that had established, and still establishes, the binary between subjectivity and otherness.⁷⁰⁰

⁶⁹⁸ Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., p.295

⁶⁹⁹ Cixous, Hélène, Keith Cohen, and Paula Cohen. "The laugh of the Medusa." *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society* 1.4, 1976, pp. 875-893., p. 878

⁷⁰⁰ See D. Haraway, *Situated Knowledges*. According to Haraway, the existence of a dualism between mind/body, subject/object, nature/culture is at the origin of any refusal of diversity.

In the Romantic evolution of the grotesque by Mary Shelley (see Chapter 2), we saw that monstrosity is expressed through the female invisible, yet devastating, action of the Plague in *The Last Man*, where there is no carnivalesque possibility for humanity but annihilation. In Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, on the contrary, the grotesque becomes a revitalising, disruptive, subversive force for the re-acquirement of a female, embodied subjectivity. Therefore, the female monster does not only subvert the relationships of power between normative and non-normative subjects, as well as between men and women, but it also acquires a voice, which is the female, autonomous, self-made and empowered voice of a joyfully monstrous counternarrative.

3.4.3. Outer spaces and borderlands in *Nights at the Circus*

The narrative structure of Carter's *Nights at the Circus* demonstrates a gradual, geographical distancing from a central space, London, where the protagonists meet at the beginning of the novel to an extreme, almost unexplored, wild territory, first Siberia, and then Transbaikalia. Within these spaces, as it has already occurred elsewhere (such as in *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffmann*), there is a negotiation between the concepts of center and margin, as well as between subject and otherness. These spaces, that recall the Zone mentioned by Žižek when referring to Tarkovsky's cinematic scenarios (see Chapter 1), as a wild, unknown, unexplored space where both human and non-human are forced to coexist and pushed to an identity conflict, or else to an encounter, as well as to reverse their perspectives and positions. As we have seen in the first section, Carter's 1984 novel is set inside a space of 'otherness': the circus, which is also a grotesque space *par excellence*. As Francesco Galluzzi recalls in *Guida al grottesco*

Il circo è sicuramente il luogo per eccellenza della spettacolarizzazione moderna dei fenomeni grotteschi, e nacque proprio, nell'Ottocento (The Greatest Show on Earth, la celebre creatura di Phineas Taylor Barnum, forse la più grande avventura circense, venne fondata negli Stati Uniti nel 1872), prima ancora che come esibizione di perizie rischiose come quelle di trapezisti e lanciatori di coltelli, come

messa in scena di tutte le possibili diversità grottesche antropologiche e teratologiche, fossero questi freaks o abitanti di paesi lontani ed esotici.⁷⁰¹

It is Walser, thus, the normative, male, skeptical spectator who enters into the space of otherness to discover its secrets and tricks, who ends up being changed by that very space. However, the interchangeability between what is human and what is not is also expressed by the 'monsters' themselves, as we see in the novel when the Wiltshire Wonder, a dwarf-lady, perceives the men who visit Madame Schreck's freakshow as way bigger and scarier than her; this change of perspective contributes to reversing the monstrously giant and ugly with the normativity and produces what Walser defines as «that dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not».⁷⁰²

Ma Nelson's whorehouse, Madame Schreck's freakshow mausoleum, the circus that Fevvers and Walser join, the female panopticon jail presented in the third section of the novel, all these settings provide the arenas in which subjectivity is re-defined and, eventually, deconstructed. Although it only appears for a chapter, the Panopticon gives the novel an interpretative key while explaining and exposing its play between spaces and identity. Carter, in fact, imagines a Panopticon prison just as the one designed and theorised by Jeremy Bentham as a 'progressive' and Positivist representation of jail, and which Michel Foucault recovered as the epitome of the connection between power and observation (surveillance), and the production of the so called 'docile body' in *Discipline and Punish*, published in 1975.

Created by the Countess P., a lady who had conceived the female jail as a space of meditation for women who were sentenced to prison after murdering their husbands, the Panopticon from *Nights at the Circus* obliges each inmate to be constantly observed by the Countess, who embodies the eye of the authority:

It was a *panopticon* she forced them to build, a hollow circle of cells shaped like a doughnut, the inward-facing wall of which was composed of grids of steel and, in the middle of the roofed, central courtyard, there was a round room surrounded by

⁷⁰¹ Bordoni, Carlo and Alessandro Scarsella, ed., *Guida al grottesco*, Odoja, Bologna, 2017, p.85

⁷⁰² Carter, Angela, *Nights at the Circus*. Random House, 2012., p.295

windows. In that room she'd sit all day and stare and stare and stare at her murderesses and they, in turn, sat all day and stared at her.⁷⁰³

This arena of monitored, abnormal corporealities represented by female murderers subverts the Panopticon's scope by reducing all the inmates to a deterministic, evil, impersonal collectivity. As Foucault explains,

one finds in the programme of the Panopticon a similar concern with individualizing observation, with characterization and classification, with the analytical arrangement of space. The Panopticon is a royal menagerie; the animal is replaced by man, individual distribution by specific grouping and the king by the machinery of a furtive power.⁷⁰⁴

The Panopticon, thus, contributes to a double and consequential phenomenon: the illusion for the body that it is being constantly scrutinised and monitored and the illusion for the power that it has a total-range control over the bodies; this creates a sort of equilibrium between those who are controlled and those who are doing the controlling.

However, once in *Nights at the Circus* an inmate subverts the logics of control enacted by power, she concretely represents a factor of crisis for the established power. As a matter of fact, it is possible to observe how the inmates fall in love with each other and plan a collective escape from the Panopticon while inventing uncontrolled practices of communication. Similarly, the legitimate power relegates illegitimate forms of expression, as well as monstrous corporealities, within spaces that the power can control and consider abnormal, such as the freakshows, the circus, the whorehouses, and other spaces of otherness. The Panopticon, in other terms, functions in *Nights at the Circus* as an exemplary declination of abnormality: the women inmates aim to found a parthenogenetic, counter-society based upon love, as a form of reaction against misogyny and the male gaze. Just as they escape from the Panopticon, Fevvers escapes from Madame Schreck's freakshow, while refusing to be a passive declination of

⁷⁰³ Ivi, p. 210

⁷⁰⁴ Foucault, Michel, *Discipline and Punish*, New York, Vintage, 1979, p.203

monstrosity, instead embracing her own idea of being a female monster. As a consequence, she breaks Madame Schreck's study window, and flies away.

As Joanne M. Gass concludes in her article *Panopticism in 'Nights at the Circus'*,

The panopticon, as we have seen, is not inescapable. Although the human body, and especially the female body, is, as Foucault asserts, "the 'site' at which all forms of repression are ultimately registered," it is also, in *Nights at the Circus*, the locus for another kind of discourse. As David Harvey writes in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, "The only way to 'eliminate the fascism in our heads' is to explore and build upon the open qualities of human discourse, and thereby intervene in the way knowledge is produced and constituted at the particular sites where...power-discourse prevails."⁶ In Carter's novel the site is the female body, but that body has wings, and she can fly.⁷⁰⁵

In the narrative parable of Angela Carter's female characters, Fevvers is halfway between the Sadian transgender woman of *The Passion of New Eve* and the desecrating stage presence of the sisters Dora and Nora Chance, protagonists of *Wise Children* (1991), Carter's last novel. It is curious, moreover, that also in her last novel Carter has chosen as protagonists two women from the carnivalesque world of theatre and the Shakespearian comedy, who have lived their whole lives in the spotlight and who choose to tell their past stories to the reader, playing with the concepts of truth and narrative fiction.

Faced with Carter's female narrator, then, we have no choice but to trust what is being told by them. Fevvers, in this sense, embodies the woman who literally takes flight, rejecting the search for empirical truth and the objectifying passivity to which the monster is forced, and escaping the Panopticon's attempt at containment and classification. As in David Harvey's reflection, Carter explores the modes of production of cultural discourse on the female body, creating embodied figurations that endanger power. Carter's monstrous woman, therefore, reclaims her Self by losing herself in the territories of diversity, and rediscovering herself as a subject,

⁷⁰⁵ Gass, Joanne M., "Panopticism in 'Nights at the Circus.' (Angela Carter)." *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 14.3, 1994, pp. 71-77.
([https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Panopticism+in+%27Nights+at+the+Circus.%27+\(Angela+Carte+r\)-a015906147](https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Panopticism+in+%27Nights+at+the+Circus.%27+(Angela+Carte+r)-a015906147)) [last access: 21/10/2021]

finally acquiring an autonomous voice and a place from which she can be heard.

Chapter Four

Jeanette Winterson's representation of queer monstrosity: from *Sexing the Cherry* to *Frankissstein*

4.1. Blurring boundaries: Metamorphosis or Winterson's fiction at a crossroads

Susana Onega, in her essay on the literary works of Jeanette Winterson, places the British author in the wake of those writers of the second half of the 20th century who had access to a 'university education' and who developed a vast competence and knowledge of literary theory as well as of the literary canon, to the point of taking it into consideration to operate a process of redefinition of that canon on the basis of new models and ideological parameters. Onega gives the examples of Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Marina Warner, Salman Rushdie, Peter Ackroyd, Angela Carter and finally Jeanette Winterson. Their skill lies in their interest

in history and in the problematic relationship of self and the world and, in various degrees, a relish for metafiction; that is, they share a self-conscious and playful tendency to foreground the artificiality and linguistic nature of their own literary texts, revealing the constructedness of the realism-enhancing mechanisms employed in them.⁷⁰⁶

Hence, the feminist element has added symbolic relevance to the counter-narrative process of authors like Carter and Winterson. Their skill lies in their interest

⁷⁰⁶ Onega, Susana, *Jeanette Winterson*. Manchester University Press, 2016.

in history and in the problematic relationship of self and world, and, in various degrees, a relish for metafiction; that is, they share a self-conscious and playful tendency to foreground the artificiality and linguistic nature of their own literary texts, revealing the constructedness of the realism-enhancing mechanisms employed in them.⁷⁰⁷

As Onega observes, irony and parody become part of this process of structural dissolution together with the fantastic narrative, which promotes the transgression of the limits which separate the self from the other, man from woman, animal from human and organic from non-organic, and it describes a constant metamorphosis process which dismantles the coherence of the self. What defines as postmodern these previously listed British authors who worked between the 1970s and 1980s is their ability to combine elements of metafiction with fantastic elements, with an apparently contradictory realism - enhancing interest in history and the traditional storytelling aspect of fiction. The feminist element thus added symbolic relevance to the counter-narrative process of authors like Carter and Winterson.

Critics such as Naile Sarmasik and Gemma Lopez⁷⁰⁸ have identified a fair correlation between the writing of Angela Carter and that of Jeanette Winterson. Sarmasik defines Winterson as «a feminist postmodern writer» who «deconstructs the patriarchal fairy tale» focusing on her use of the fairy tale element in novels such as *Sexing the Cherry* (1989), and adapting the story of the “Twelve Dancing Princesses” attributing a new psychology to the protagonists of the Grimm brothers' tale. This process of restoring voice to the narrated subject matter had already been pioneered by Carter in *The Bloody Chamber*, and in her subsequent (and posthumously published) collection of the *Virago Books of Fairy Tales* (1991). Despite Winterson's controversial position in postmodern literature due to her self-proclaimed status as a modernist author in her non-fictional book of literary theory *Art Objects*, on which I will elaborate later, Winterson responds to the same stylistic and ideological assumptions that animate the writing of her predecessor and semi-contemporary colleague, Angela Carter. These

⁷⁰⁷ Ivi, p.2

⁷⁰⁸ López, Gemma, *Seductions in narrative: Subjectivity and desire in the works of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson*. Cambria Press, 2007, Kindle Edition.

assumptions are the same ones identified by Linda Hutcheon as 'postmodern concerns'. Among these concerns, we find the

de-naturaliz[ation of] some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural' (...) are share a self-conscious and playful tendency to foreground the artificiality and linguistic nature of their own literary texts, revealing the constructedness of the realism-enhancing mechanisms employed in them.⁷⁰⁹

As we can observe from the case study analysed by Sarmasik, that is, the short story 'The Twelve Dancing Princesses', extracted from Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry*⁷¹⁰, both Winterson and Carter make use of postmodern devices to deconstruct tradition and the patriarchal values inherent in it. Both authors, in fact, make use of the parodic element to avail themselves of its subversive power. «For artists», Linda Hutcheon states, «the postmodern is said to involve a rummaging through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations their parody calls to our attention»⁷¹¹. The classification of Carter's and Winterson's stories as parodies derives from the degree of difference from the literary tradition and commonality with it, which generates both an intersection and a feeling of 'shock of the new' produced by the ideological charge inserted in their works.

In both Carter's and Winterson's narration, it is possible to observe the centrality of metamorphosis as a key tool for both corporeality and identity, overcoming the distinct dualisms of mind and body, and rather considering these two elements as interchangeable and inseparable. Metamorphosis nullifies the presumed patriarchal and objectifying idea of identity as a stable concept. As Lopez suggests, narratives of metamorphoses from a feminist perspective are helpful to provide us not only a defiance to this precarious illusion of stability of

⁷⁰⁹ Onega, Susana, *Jeanette Winterson*. Manchester University Press, 2016., p. 2

⁷¹⁰ Winterson, Jeanette, *Sexing the cherry*. Random House, 2014.

⁷¹¹ Hutcheon, Linda, *The politics of postmodernism*. Routledge, 2003., p.89

the self, but also to face «the consequences that an ambiguous state may have on the self presumed psychic solidity.»⁷¹²

As Marina Warner shows in her essay *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds*, «tales of metamorphoses often arose in spaces (temporal, geographical, and mental) that were crossroads, cross-cultural zones, points of interchange on the intricate connective tissue of communications between cultures».⁷¹³ In other terms, a metamorphosis, according to Warner, as well as Kristeva theorised in *Strangers to Ourselves* (see Chapter 3), is an access to difference: the subject leaves the comfort zone based on the illusion of its immutability and accepts the risk of becoming an othered identity, namely, a monstrosity, an abject. The peculiarity of a feminist narration such as Winterson's, as well as Carter's, is the acquirement of a point of view from the margins, speaking from the territory of difference. The shaping of subjectivity as an artificial construct based on cultural frameworks and systems of belief is present in Winterson's novels as well as the refusal of it by her monstrous, grotesque characters is present. The lack of naturalness in culture characterises the poststructuralist subject, who opposes to the Cartesian cogito and recognises the artificial construction of the Self.⁷¹⁴

Therefore, Winterson's characters gradually contest each system of belief they once belonged to: the Catholic church in *Oranges are not the only fruit*, the Napoleonic Empire in *The Passion*, the heterosexual family and its paradigmatic role, or even the anthropocentric perspective in *The Stone Gods*, *Gut Symmetries* and her latest work, *Frankissstein*. The use of language that Winterson makes as a tool to put in evidence her counternarrative creative act can be synthesised in her statement from *Art Objects*, as she states:

⁷¹² López, Gemma, in "Ambiguous Metamorphoses and Leaking Identities" in *Seductions in narrative: Subjectivity and desire in the works of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson*. Cambria Press, 2007., Kindle edition.

⁷¹³ Warner, Marina, *Fantastic metamorphoses, other worlds: ways of telling the self*. OUP Oxford, 2004., p.19

⁷¹⁴ Belsey, Catherine, *Poststructuralism: A very short introduction*. OUP Oxford, 2002., p.66

When a thing is perfectly made it has no fastenings or seams. It will not come apart in your hands. What you do manage to pull to pieces is a construct of your own. A fully realised piece of work cannot be put into 'other words'. Change the words, even by trying to substitute dictionary definitions, and you will change the meaning. This is not because language is imprecise and subject to landslide, it is because it is exact. In the right hands it is exact.⁷¹⁵

As it emerges from *Art Objects*, published in 1996, and which is considered as Winterson's artistic manifesto, the author rejects some critical definitions that have classified her writing as a postmodern and 'lesbian' writing. As a late 20th century writer, Winterson recognises the importance of innovation, as well as defends the necessity of considering the cultural past as a pivotal point from where the author/artist can create. In this process, the author must always take into account the function of the reader as receiver of the art product, which is a relationship based on trust:

The relationship between the reader and the writer's work has to be one of trust, for even the most convinced of readers will not be always convinced. We come back to those favourite books, inevitably parts of a writer's work will find more favour than others. To trust is to submit to the experiment, to stay the course, to sit up late and wait. [...] Our own age is very quick to judge and even to prejudge, perhaps as part of a determined effort to make sure that art never opens its own mouth. It has teeth, art, and a way of cutting through to the soft parts untried.⁷¹⁶

Similarly, Winterson attributes a remarkable importance to Modernists and their work, describing them as «a group of people working towards rewriting literature to its roots in speech (which is not the same thing as forcing literature down to speech).»⁷¹⁷ Moving from the Modernist idea of language as an autonomous entity, Winterson assigns to Modernists the credit of having blurred the boundaries between literary genres:

⁷¹⁵ Winterson, Jeanette, *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery*. E-book, Random House, 1995.

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For the ordinary reader, the Modernist writer looked desperately difficult (Eliot) desperately dirty (Joyce) desperately dull (Woolf). Novels were meant to be novels (stories), and poems were meant to be poetic (pastorals, ballads, and during the war, protests). Amongst its other crimes, Modernism was questioning the boundaries between the two.⁷¹⁸

While discussing the relationship between realism and tradition, Winterson recalls that there is a link between a cultural revolution and a rebellion against tradition:

Revolution upsets order and most of us prefer a quiet life. The revolt against Realism was really a revolt of tradition. The Modernists were trying to return to an idea of art as a conscious place (their critics would say a self-conscious place), a place outside of both rhetoric and cliché.⁷¹⁹

Therefore, Winterson evidences the powerful role of Modernism of re-discussing the boundaries between literary genres, and notices how the criteria of evaluation on literature and, to an extent, on arts, are quite cyclical and common in their approach:

If it strikes us as strange that a group of people working towards returning literature to its roots in speech (which is not the same thing as forcing literature down to speech), should be regarded as remote and disconnected, it is worth remembering two things: 1) That we judge new work by a template of the past from which it has already escaped. 2) That the popular novelists and popular poets seemed to be the rightful inheritors of literary tradition because they were perpetuating what had been done well enough and often enough to be familiar.⁷²⁰

Therefore, Winterson embraces that past tradition that excludes realism and regards the period 1900-1945, including Modernists «of poetry and prose; H D, Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Sitwell, Mansfield, Barney,

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Radclyffe Hall, Eliot, Graves, Pound and Yeats.»⁷²¹ Winterson also manifests her devotion for male authors like Donne, Blake, Keats, Shelley.⁷²²

Another aspect deriving from Winterson's alignment with the Modernist tradition comes from her refusal to call her fictions 'novels', opposing herself to a 'spirit of the age' rather than to a genre as such, and evidencing her problematic compromise, shared by other postmodern writings, with storytelling:

I pack my pages with shiny things even though I am a writer who does not use plot as an engine or a foundation. What I do use are stories within stories within stories within stories. I am not particularly interested in folk tales or fairy tales, but I do have them about my person, and like Autolycus (*The Winter's Tale*), I find that they are assumed to be worth more than they are.⁷²³

Another classification that Jeanette Winterson rejects is the one of being considered a lesbian author. As Silvia Antosa notes, there are female British authors who identify their writing process with their sexual orientation, converting it into an ideological and political action, as it occurs with Sarah Waters, author of *Fingersmith*, published in 2002. The definition itself of 'lesbian novel' is still an ongoing process, as it is not a recognizable genre but rather a literary form, as Marilyn R. Farwell⁷²⁴ (1996) comments. The mutation of the ideological and interpretative strategies influences the development of a lesbian narrative and makes it porous as literary category.

As Antosa recalls, Winterson always denied being a spokesperson for women and, least of all, for lesbian women, and has always claimed the priority of her research and her experimentation with literature.⁷²⁵ In *Art Objects*, Winterson

⁷²¹ Ivi

⁷²² Onega, Susana, *Jeanette Winterson*. Manchester University Press, 2016., p.11

⁷²³ Ibid.

⁷²⁴ Farwell, Marilyn R., "Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Subtexts: Toward a Theory of Lesbian Narrative Space in Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*." *Arthurian Women: A Casebook*, 1996, pp. 319-330.

⁷²⁵ Antosa, Silvia, "L'identità queer nella narrativa di Jeanette Winterson.", 2006, pp. 118-134. in Rizzo, Domenico, ed. *Omosapiens*. Vol. 1. Carocci, 2006., p.119

clearly epitomises her view on considering a lesbian author as essentialistically belonging to a collective lesbian thought or literary project:

I was in a bookshop recently when a young woman approached me. She told me she was writing an essay on my work and that of Radclyffe Hall. Could I help? 'Yes,' I said. 'Our work has nothing in common.' 'I thought you were a lesbian,' she said. I have become aware that the chosen sexual difference of one writer is, in itself, thought sufficient to bind her in semiotic sisterhood with any other writer, also lesbian, dead or alive. I am, after all, a pervert, so I will not mind sharing a bed with a dead body. This bed in the shape of a book, this book in the shape of a bed, must accommodate us every one, because, whatever our style, philosophy, class, age, preoccupations and talent, we are lesbians and isn't that the golden key to the single door of our work? In any discussion of art and the artist, heterosexuality is backgrounded, whilst homosexuality is foregrounded.⁷²⁶

Nevertheless, Winterson's denial to belong to a universalistic category of lesbian writing corresponds to an overtly queer and feminist ideology that shapes both the characters of her literary works and the narrative techniques adopted. I agree with Antosa in recognising in Winterson the same 'queer thought' theorised by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her collection *Tendencies*. To Sedgwick, "queer" is "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically".⁷²⁷ This definition of 'queer' given by Sedgwick perfectly embraces as well the feminist agenda, gender studies and the poststructuralist philosophy of nullifying the relationship between an ideal center opposed to an ideal margin, to whom it may correspond two different types of identities, the Self vs. the Other.

However, it is important to notice how Winterson attributes to art the priority of preceding queer culture in its attempt of contesting the premises of identity as intertwined with sexuality, while «creating emotion around the forbidden.»⁷²⁸ In

⁷²⁶ Winterson, Jeanette, *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery*. E-book, Random House, 1995.

⁷²⁷ Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Tendencies*. Duke University Press, 1993., p.8

⁷²⁸ Winterson, Jeanette, *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery*. E-book, Random House, 1995.

this regard, Winterson refers to examples of crossdressing from the 19th century opera, passing through the Elizabethan/Shakespearian theatre:

Similarly, I am sure that a lot of the coyness and silliness that accompanies productions of Shakespeare that include cross-dressing roles, is an attempt to steer them clear of Queer. As long as we all know that a pretence is happening; the pretence of Principal Boy or music-hall camp, we are safe in our het-suits. Too many directors overlook the obvious fact that in Shakespeare, the disguises are meant to convince. They are not a comedian's joke. We too must fall in love. We too must know what it is to find that we have desired another woman, desired another man. And should we really take at face value those fifth acts where everyone simply swops their partner to the proper sex and goes home to live happily ever after?

I am not suggesting that we should all part with our husbands and live Queer. I am not suggesting that a lesbian who recognises desire for a man sleep with him. We need not be so crude. What we do need is to accept in ourselves, with pleasure, the subtle and various emotions that are the infinity of a human being. More, not less, is the capacity of the heart. More not less is the capacity of art.⁷²⁹

Winterson, thus, plays on the assonance between the term 'heart' and the term 'art', suggesting how the artistic process from his queer perspective must always be guided by a conjunction between an involvement of the desire of those producing the work of art and the product itself. According to this view of the relationship between art and human feelings, it is possible to read the cross-dressing adopted by English theatre since Shakespeare's time as the expression of a play of roles and desires of society within its predefined heteropatriarchal schemes, to which non-heterosexual desires must conform in the final re-absorption of the characters to their respective gender binarisms, i.e. male and female.

Therefore, it is no surprise that several works by Jeanette Winterson, such as *Sexing the Cherry* (1989)⁷³⁰ and *The Passion* (1987),⁷³¹ use history, the European cultural tradition and iconic scenarios of the collective imagination, like Venice during the Neapolitan Age (*The Passion*) or London during the Restoration Age (*Sexing the Cherry*) in order to re-negotiate with those territories which are commonly considered as spaces for heteronormative subjects, the

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⁷³⁰ Winterson, Jeanette, *Sexing the cherry*. Random House, 2014.

⁷³¹ Winterson, Jeanette, *The Passion*, London: Bloomsbury Press, 1987

gender roles, evidencing their performative power as well as the counternarrative and re-actualising power of art; this contributes to give a voice to those ‘forbidden’ (to quote Winterson from *Art Objects*), and thus monstrous, identity experiences who, rather than ‘testifying from the margins, re-invent the discourse between the center of society and culture, throughout a metafiction that has the function of rewriting their social role and which puts a strain on a stable, normative, limiting notion of subjectivity.

For this reason, then, Susana Onega considers the contribution of Jeanette Winterson to Modernism (or Postmodernism) because of her contribution to the novel as a genre, giving the novel what Onega calls «a capacity for survival and renewal» and because Winterson has fully adopted that capacity for metamorphosis and renewal which was also accepted by late Modernists, such as Doris Lessing, Alasdair Gray, Muriel Spark and William Golding.⁷³²

Furthermore, in her interview with Margaret Reynolds (see *Jeanette Winterson: Essential Guide*)⁷³³, Winterson recognises the nature of her writing, after that Reynolds notices that *The Passion* has several references to the imaginary of Postmodern cities by Italo Calvino’s *Le città invisibili*. As Winterson explains, in fact,

All texts work off other texts. It’s a continual rewriting and rereading of what has gone before, and you hope that you can add something now. There is interpretation as well as creation in everything that happens with books. But for me, working off Calvino was a way of aligning myself with the European tradition where I feel much comfortable. That’s a tradition which uses fantasy and invention and leaps of time, of space, rather than in the Anglo-American tradition which is much more realistic in its narrative drive and much more a legacy of the nineteenth century. Modernism here really moved sideways and has been picked up much more by European writers. We lost it completely (...) whereas writers like Borges and Calvino and Perec wanted to go on with those experiments and didn’t see Modernism as a *cul-de-sac*, but as a way forwards other possibilities.⁷³⁴

⁷³² Onega, Susana, *Jeanette Winterson*. Manchester University Press, 2016., p.13

⁷³³ Noakes, Jonathan, and Margaret Reynolds, *Jeanette Winterson: the Essential Guide*. Vol. 5. Random House, 2012.

⁷³⁴ Ivi, pp.11-29

Therefore, if compared to Angela Carter's more explicit intention of 'putting new wine in old bottles' in order to make the old bottle, i.e. the literary canon, explode, while the 'new wine' standing for the new feminist literary demythologising writing, Winterson underlines, both in Reynolds' interview and in *Art Objects*, the necessity and the final scope for her role as writer: hoping to add something new and moving from both the traditional, Western cultural heritage and referring to the Modernist tradition, to whom she owes her experimental approach to literature.

As Antosa observes, furthermore, there is in Winterson's narrative, a multiplicity of declinations of approaches that the British author enacts in order to explore the paradigm of fluidity, and always in order to problematise the relationship between the bodily boundaries and gender identity. Within this approach, the cultural tradition that Winterson uses as a base for her revisionist methodology becomes functional to her strategic counternarration of the body and the identity while inserted within the normative space of tradition. This occurs, as it is possible to observe, in several cases from her literary production: in *Oranges are not the Only Fruit* (1985), her first semi-autobiographical novel, Winterson moves from her Christian cultural background from her childhood and programmatically plays with the Old Testament to write a *Bildungsroman* and semi-autobiographical story on a lesbian coming out; while naming the eight chapters from the book as the first eight books from the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth), and at the same time creating parallelisms between the Biblical books and the events that affect Jeanette's life, Winterson aimed to establish a parallelism and a problematization of the patriarchal, Old Testament tradition.

The Powerbook (2000) has been interpreted by the critics (Antosa) as a cybernetic re-actualization of great love stories from the European tradition of the *romance*, such as Tristan and Isolde and Lancelot and Geneve.⁷³⁵ Here,

⁷³⁵ Antosa, Silvia, "L'identità queer nella narrativa di Jeanette Winterson.", 2006, pp. 118-134. in Rizzo, Domenico, ed. *Omosapiens*. Vol. 1. Carocci, 2006., p.131

however, Winterson expands the possibilities for romantic love from the tradition to overcome its limits and embrace an identitary and corporeal metamorphosis which is favoured by the 'invented world'⁷³⁶ of the internet, where the organic dimension of the human body leaves the place to the posthuman, metamorphic, cyborg-like potentiality of a virtual identity, which is not a monolithic and locked into a binary status one.

You say you want to be transformed. This is where the story starts. Here, in these long lines of laptop DNA. Here we take your chromosomes, twenty-three pairs, and alter your height, eyes, teeth, sex. This is an invented world. You can be free just for one night.

Undress. Take off your clothes. Take off your body. Hang them up behind the door. Tonight we can go deeper than disguise.⁷³⁷

Similarly, *Written on the Body* (1994)⁷³⁸ is a strategic rewriting of the tradition of the *romance*, whereas both the literary *romance* and the scientific language that aims to classify the body, its sex, its pathologies and its organic surface. The idea of the virtual prevailing over the 'real/material' is anticipated here by the protagonist's description of their (the main character's gender is never specified so I will use the non-binary pronoun 'they') relationship Louise, the 'object of love' of the romantic narration: «We were in a virtual world where the only taboo was real life.»⁷³⁹ Therefore, the pattern of the body, its fluidity and at the same time the fluidity of the character's identity that accompanies the corporeal metamorphosis can be considered, if we analyse Jeanette Winterson's literary production, as a Modernist parable of investigation, since Winterson herself refers to Robert Graves writing as «seem[ing] to the reader to be some great arc made of many colours and perfectly broken into one another.»⁷⁴⁰

⁷³⁶ Winterson, Jeanette, *The powerbook.*, Vintage, 2013, p.4

⁷³⁷ Ibid.

⁷³⁸ Winterson, Jeanette, *Written on the Body*, Vintage, 1992, p. 98

⁷³⁹ Ivi, p.98

⁷⁴⁰ Winterson, Jeanette, *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery*. E-book, Random House, 1995.

Likewise, by her own admission, there is a *continuum* in Winterson's novel. In Reynolds' interview, in fact, when questioned on why she quotes herself in her books, Winterson answers:

Because all books speak to each other . They are only separate books because that's how they had to be written. I see them really as one long continuous piece of work. I've said that the seven books [at the time of the interview, Winterson was referring to her seven novels published between 1985 and 2000] make a cycle or a series, and I believe that they do, from *Oranges* to *The Powerbook*.⁷⁴¹

Although some critics, such as D.J. Taylor, contradicted this statement by Winterson on her work as «one long continuous piece of work», considering her novel *Lighthousekeeping* (2004) as the confirmation that «everything she writes is essentially a variation on the same thing.»⁷⁴²

I believe that Winterson's post-2004 literary production confirms her statement on her work as a *continuum*, where the central element is the materiality of the body, its changeability and how identity adapts to this process. In particular, a *leitmotiv* which has been evidenced by Anna Kérchy is how Winterson's novels represent the relationship between outcast subjectivities and their attempt to witness their experience, often by means of a 1st person narration, in empowering fictional spaces. This occurs because, as Winterson herself states on her website, a feminist usage of narrative, together with a counternarrative shaping of traditional fictional spaces, contributes to the creation of a postmodernist narrative strategy which challenges both tradition and its spaces, whether real or fictional.

As Winterson writes, it is by «writing the familiar into the strange, by wording the unlovely into words-as-jewels' that 'the outcast can be brought home in word-dependent words' generated by the outcast herself.»⁷⁴³ Plus, I agree with

⁷⁴¹ Reynolds, Margaret, and Jonathan Noakes, "Interview with Jeanette Winterson." *Jeanette Winterson, the Essential Guide*, 2003, p.25

⁷⁴² D.J. Taylor, 'The Solace of Solitude: Lighthousekeeping', *Literary Review*, May 2004, p.49

⁷⁴³ Kérchy, Anna, "Feminist Psychogeography and Jeanette Winterson's Passions." *She's leaving home women's writing in English in a European context*. 2011., p.136

Kérchy's parallelism between Winterson's narrative politics and Rosi Braidotti's idea of a nomadic subjectivity,

distinguished by the 'becoming' 'in-process', and the practice of 'as-if', the 'technique of strategic re-location', 'the affirmation of fluid boundaries, 'a practice of the intervals, of the interlaces, and the interest, and the interstices' [...] The textual pleasures and surprises resulting from Winterson's fundamentally unpredictable (dis)positions evoke this nomadic 'critical consciousness [...] engendering transformations and changes (Braidotti, 1994: 7) and, thus, easily lend themselves to feminist psychogeographical analysis.⁷⁴⁴

The topic of otherness as a category of marginalization evolves in Winterson's writing by following a politics of affection which evokes the power of creating bonds suggested by the Braidottian nomadic subject, as «Winterson's orphan-like, nomadic characters revisit myths of the socially assigned home and the biological family to arrive at the recognition about home being where the heart is, home being in other, beloved people awaiting for us.»⁷⁴⁵ Thus, we see the othered characters from Winterson's literary production renegotiating even their relationship with the public sphere and their gender and sexuality, making the normative space as a field where they can enable their voice and subjectivity and transform the alliance between othered subjectivities as an empowering union. This occurs in *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) between Jordan, the male protagonist of the novel, and his foster mother, the grotesque Dog-Woman, a giantess that adopts Jordan as a child; the same empowering union occurs between the amphibious androgynous gondolier-lady, Villanelle, and her male counterpart, the Bonapartian soldier, Henri, in *The Passion* (1989); it also occurs between the cyborg Spike and the scientist Billie from *The Stone Gods* (2007).⁷⁴⁶ It also occurs in Winterson's most recent novel, *Frankissstein*⁷⁴⁷, published in 2019, between

⁷⁴⁴ Ivi, p.137

⁷⁴⁵ Ivi, p.138

⁷⁴⁶ Winterson, Jeanette, *The Stone Gods: A Novel*, HMH, 2009.

⁷⁴⁷ Winterson, Jeanette, *Frankissstein. A Love Story*, Penguin Random House, London, 2019, 2019.

the transgender doctor, Ry Shelley, and the transhumanist scientist, Victor (Franken)Stein.

I argue that the vision of the monster as figuration from Jeanette Winterson's novels is a queer monster that embodies a gender transformation and makes its identity fluidity an emancipatory and counternarrative element that aims to counteract any binary, anthropocentric and heteronormative vision of the self. As Kérchy shows, the journey's pattern is an element that is intrinsic within the Winterson's character, and consequently the space of otherness in incarnated by the monstrous subject itself, who still remains a monstrous subject despite their ability to crossing the border areas between spaces of otherness and spaces of normativity. This permanence of monstrosity, however, rather than underlining the binary contrast between the Subject and the Other offers once again a possibility of crisis for the norm, and consequently a re-negotiation of identity and its very construction.

The aim of this chapter is to trace an analysis of monstrosity as a queer figuration in Jeanette Winterson's novels and how these abjected subjectivities negotiate with the spaces, whether oscillating between the conventional, recognised spaces of normativity and the othered, marginalising borderlands. After a first analysis of the female grotesque corporeality in *Sexing the Cherry* and *The Passion*, and their bodily relationship within a historiographic-metafictional literary scenario, I will later focus on the posthuman development of Winterson's politics of identity in some her 2000's novels, arriving at her postmodern parody and transhuman re-interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in her 2019 novel, *Frankissstein*.

4.2. Fluidity and female grotesqueness in *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry*

Both *The Passion*, published in 1987, and *Sexing the Cherry*, published in 1989,

are considered as examples of historiographic metafiction⁷⁴⁸ and both novels are set in two crucial historical moments of transition. While *The Passion*, in fact, narrates the story of two characters, Henri and Villanelle, the first a French soldier while the second a Venetian boatwoman, on the scenario of the Napoleonic military campaigns in Russia, *Sexing the Cherry*, instead, while being set in two different social spaces, develops its story during the 17th century London, mixing up the life of the two main characters, the rescued orphan Jordan and his grotesque foster mother, called Dog-Woman. In both novels, the artificiality and arbitrariness of official history and the partial recount of historical events is counterbalanced by the testimony of the characters, who all represent abject experiences, and refuse the masculine, linear, canonical vision of history.⁷⁴⁹

This linear vision of history had already been problematised by Winterson in *Oranges are Not the Only Fruit*, where, as Antosa explains, Winterson «defines history as a 'reducing of stories' which do not offer a truthful account of past events, but a forced one-sided version of it brought about by the patriarchal system.»⁷⁵⁰ As already anticipated, the scope of Winterson's re-usage of canonical history and the literary tradition responds to Linda Hutcheon's definition of historiographic metafiction and postmodern writing as tools to re-assert the voice of «the ex-centrics, the marginalised, the peripheral figures of fictional history” and, thus, the relationship between the normative 'centre' and the anti-normative 'margin'.»⁷⁵¹ While the typology of queer monstrosity represented in *The Passion* differs from the grotesque Bakhtinian aesthetics of the Dog-Woman from *Sexing the Cherry*, I argue that these two female monsters are specular to one another, as they both embody an empowering hybridity that allows both Villanelle and the Dog-Woman to become subjects who are able to cross the social boundaries of Venice and London. While in the case of Villanelle, in fact,

⁷⁴⁸ Antosa, Silvia, "L'identità queer nella narrativa di Jeanette Winterson." 2006, pp. 118-134. in Rizzo, Domenico, ed. *Omosapiens*. Vol. 1. Carocci, 2006., p.123

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁵⁰ Antosa, Silvia, "Crossing Boundaries: Bodily Paradigms in Jeanette Winterson's Fiction 1985-2000." Aracne, 2008., p.58

⁷⁵¹ Hutcheon, Linda, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, New York, 1988., p.114

her main corporeal element is fluidity, which is also a reflection of the labyrinthine map of Venice, her hometown, similarly, in *Sexing the Cherry*, the Gargantuan female body of the Dog-Woman becomes a hyperbolic field of regeneration and carnivalesque empowerment, as it occurred in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* with the character of Fevvers.

As Sara Martin notes in her article *The Power of Monstrous Women*⁷⁵², there is a tendency to prefer grotesqueness due to its comical effect rather than horrific monstrosity in novels like *Sexing the Cherry* and *Nights at the Circus*. This, according to Martin, does not give women «the power to make [them] face up to the monster in them.»⁷⁵³ I do not agree with Martin's statement because I believe that the female grotesque body represents the real alternative to the construction of horror if related to the female body that has colonised the Western cultural imagery and, as also Barbara Creed has shown in her essay *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993). This is, I believe, the major point of conjunction between the Dog-Woman from *Sexing the Cherry* and Villanelle from *The Passion*: they both are in a metamorphosis state, the former due to the Bakhtinian, carnivalesque materiality of her body made of flesh, secretions, filths, and fluids, while the latter because of her 'liquid' (or fluid, and thus as such not crystallised in a fixed identitary status) nature that reflects the nature of Venice, her city, which is depicted by Winterson as a space of otherness *par excellence*, and which, although the Napoleonic power is impossible to be contained nor classified by conventional cartography.

In *The Passion*, even the conventional gender roles are subverted between the two main characters: while Henri, in fact, responds to a passive, weak, effeminate example of masculinity, not even able to take part in Napoleon's army because of his frail physicality and therefore chosen as a cook for Napoleon's army, Villanelle, on the other hand is immediately presented as an

⁷⁵² Martin, Sara, "The Power of Monstrous Women: Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989)." *Journal of Gender Studies* 8.2, 1999, pp. 193-210.

⁷⁵³ Ivi, p. 209

active, non-conventional example of femininity, depicted as androgynous and amphibious. This characteristic of her feet makes her a hybrid creature both in the human/animal binary and on the male/female binary.

As Nicoletta Vallorani and Anna Pasolini explain, thus, the centrality of Villanelle's bodily dimension is made of gender performativity as well as of incarnated differences:

Anche in *The Passion*, nonostante il testo sia spesso pervaso da un'atmosfera onirica, surreale, e da numerosi echi fiabeschi, la dimensione corporea è centrale, ed è giocata proprio su una serie di apparenti paradossi tra le conseguenze fisiche e politiche di esperienza materializzata e performatività da un lato, e l'evocazione simbolica che sfugge a ogni tentativo di circoscrivere le potenzialità del corpo come significante dall'altro. Attraverso l'ibridismo fisico e narrativo, la mescolanza di tratti somatici e voci narranti, Winterson scompagina associazioni culturali e simboliche legate al maschile e al femminile e alla dimensione sessuata, e soprattutto celebra la fluidità dell'identità e delle possibilità del gender giocando con le convenzioni della testualità.⁷⁵⁴

As a matter of fact, Villanelle hybrid and magical corporeality is testified even from the beginning of her narration, when she describes the circumstances in which her mother got pregnant of Villanelle, while reaching the island of San Servolo, where pregnant women perform a 'Gothic' ritual going at night on the island of the dead to make offerings to the graves of their recently dead ancestors.

The peculiarity of Villanelle's condition of hybridity is due to her mother's actions and to her condition as a pregnant widow. Therefore, Venice immediately is presented as urban counterpart of Villanelle's fluid and hybrid body, as the ambiguous and multifaceted representation of the city is a symmetrical reflection

⁷⁵⁴ "Even in *The Passion*, despite the fact that the text is often imbued with a dreamlike, surreal atmosphere and numerous fairy-tale echoes, the corporeal dimension is central, and is played out precisely on a series of apparent paradoxes between physical and political consequences of materialised experience and performativity on the one hand, and the symbolic evocation that eludes any attempt to circumscribe the potential of the body as a signifier on the other hand. Through physical and narrative hybridity, the mixing of somatic features and narrative voices, Winterson disrupts cultural and symbolic associations linked to the masculine and feminine and to the gendered dimension, and above all she celebrates the fluidity of identity and the possibilities of gender by playing with the conventions of textuality." [my translation] in Pasolini, Anna; Vallorani, Nicoletta. *Corpi magici. Scritture incarnate dal fantastico alla fantascienza*, (Italian Edition). Mimesis Edizioni, 2020. Mimesis Edizioni. Kindle Edition, pp.48-49

of Villanelle's androgynous bisexual and monstrous corporeality. The folktale incipit used by Villanelle in her autobiographic narration of the moment of her own conceiving and following birth is functional to provide a magic intersection between her body and the Venetian fluidity: «There was once a weak and foolish man whose wife cleaned the boat and sold fish and brought up their children».⁷⁵⁵ The ritual that is performed by the boatmen's wives from Venice refers to a legend according to which boatmen have webbed feet, which are appropriate to their profession of hybrid human beings working on water, the space for amphibious creatures, and they inherit these physical trait from their male boatmen ancestors. This makes the webbed foot a masculine characteristic. Conversely, the mistake brings Villanelle's hybrid nature that gives her webbed feet as her male ancestors:

This is the legend. When a boatman's wife finds herself pregnant she was until the moon is full and the night empty of idlers. Then she takes her husband's boat and rows to a terrible island where the dead are buried. She leaves her boat with rosemary in the bows so that the limbless ones cannot return with her and hurries to the grave of the most recently dead in her family. She has brought her offerings: a flask of wine, a lock of hair from her husband and a silver coin. She must leave the offerings on the grave and beg for a clean heart if her child be a girl and boatman's feet if her child be a boy. There is no time to lose. She must be home before dawn and the boat must be left for a day and a night covered in salt. In this way, the boatmen keep their secrets and their trade. No newcomer can compete. And no boatman will take off his boots, no matter how you bribe him. I have seen tourists throw diamonds to the fish, but I have never seen a boatman take off his boots.⁷⁵⁶

As we will see later, the androgynous condition of Villanelle is not only represented by her crossdressing performativity, but also by two main elements: her heartless state, because of a woman who stole her heart, the Queen of Spades, and secondly her webbed feet typical of boatmen. In describing her mother's journey to the island, Villanelle reports the woman's accidental loss of her rosemary, which is crucial for the accomplishment of a good ritual:

As she fastened the boat, an owl flew very low and she cried out and stepped back and, as she did so, dropped the sprig of rosemary into the sea. [...] The Blessed

⁷⁵⁵ Winterson, Jeanette, *The Passion*, Bloomsbury Press, London, 1987, p.60

⁷⁵⁶ Ivi, p.50

Virgin must have protected her. Even before I was born she had married again. This time, a prosperous baker who could afford to take Sundays off. The hour of my birth coincided with an eclipse of the sun and my mother did her best to slow down her labour until it had passed. But I was as impatient then as I am now and I forced my head out while the midwife was downstairs heating some milk. A fine head with a crop of red hair and a pair of eyes that made up for the sun's eclipse. A girl. It was an easy birth and the midwife held me upside down by the ankles until I bawled. But it was when they spread me out to dry that my mother fainted and the midwife felt forced to open another bottle of wine. My feet were webbed. There never was a girl whose feet were webbed in the entire history of the boatmen. My mother in her swoon had visions of rosemary and blamed herself for her carelessness.⁷⁵⁷

The feminine features and masculine ones from Villanelle encounter a magical connection once she is deprived of her heart by the Queen of Spades, her lover, impeding Villanelle to be adherent with her female predetermined destiny of woman, that a boatman's daughter must have a pure heart. At the same time, Villanelle has webbed feet, a male boatman's physical trait, which gives her a masculine connotation. This masculinity incarnated represented by Villanelle's feet contrasts with her red hair, a typical trait which is associated with female eroticism, which Villanelle uses for her own personal gain, such as when she corrupts the guards at San Servolo: «I was getting to know the warders and I had an idea that I could buy him out for money and sex. My red hair is a great attraction».⁷⁵⁸

Apart from being a boatwoman, which is unique in Venice, Villanelle also works as a casino-boy, dressed up as a man, a camouflage which intensifies her liminal status and the performativity of her gender, contributing to amplify the non-binary, androgynous image of the character, and responds, as Antosa notes,⁷⁵⁹ to the definition of drag from Judith Butler already cited in Chapter Three. Butler, in fact, underlines the artificiality of gender as a social construct, claiming that «[i]n imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself

⁷⁵⁷ Ivi, p. 51

⁷⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 148

⁷⁵⁹ Antosa, Silvia. "Crossing Boundaries: Bodily Paradigms in Jeanette Winterson's Fiction 1985-2000." Aracne, 2008., p.77

– as well as its contingency.»⁷⁶⁰ Villanelle recounts her experience as a casino-boy showing the strategic function of her camouflage, which would give her the possibility to have access to a masculine space of male power and entertainment as the casino was in Venice:

When I was eighteen I started to work the Casino. There aren't many jobs for a girl. I didn't want to go into the bakery and grow old with red hands and forearms like thighs. I couldn't be a dancer, for obvious reasons, and what I would have most liked to have done, worked the boats, was closed to me on account of my sex.⁷⁶¹

As Winterson herself acknowledges in *Art Objects*, Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* is a paradigmatic example of sexual metamorphosis and identity fluidity, as «[f]or Orlando, transformation is sex and sexuality. Orlando pushes through the confines of time [...] love objects, male and female, are appropriately wooed and bedded but not according to the confines of heterosexual desire.»⁷⁶² Therefore, this (post)modernist fluidity that Winterson associates to Villanelle's monstrous identity is reflected by the city of Venice both in its unmappable changeability and in its function of refugee space for outcasts. When describing the city when she first meets Henri, Villanelle tells:

'The city I come from is a changeable city. It is not always same size. Streets appear and disappear overnight, new waterways force themselves over dry land. There are days when you cannot walk from one end to the other, so far is the journey and there are days when a stroll will take you round your kingdom like a tin-pot Prince'.⁷⁶³

This unstable, in-becoming geography of Venice contributes to generate a grotesque space for grotesque corporealities, representing a non-defined condition and interchangeable experience between bodies and spaces according

⁷⁶⁰ Butler, Judith. "Gender trouble, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic discourse.", *Feminism/postmodernism* 327, 1990, x. , p. 137

⁷⁶¹ Winterson, Jeanette, *The Passion*, London: Bloomsbury Press, 1987, p.53

⁷⁶² Winterson, Jeanette, *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery*. E-book, Random House, 1995.

⁷⁶³ Winterson, Jeanette, *The Passion*, London: Bloomsbury Press, 1987, p. 97

to which «the cities of the interior do not lie on any map.»⁷⁶⁴ As a matter of fact, Venice is presented as an harbour for rejected personalities, peopled by outsiders such as nobles escaping from the French Revolution, Jewish, Orphans, and exiled. Venice is a labyrinthine scenario for the rejected others:

There is a city surrounded by water with watery alleys that do for streets and roads and silted up back ways that only the rats can cross. [...] This is the city of mazes. You may set off from the same place to the same place every day and never go by the same route. If you do so, it will be by mistake. Your bloodhound nose will not serve you here. Your course in compass reading will fail you. Your confident instructions to passers-by will send them to squares they have never heard of, over canals not listed in the notes. - Although wherever you are going is always in front of you, there is no such thing as straight ahead.⁷⁶⁵

Therefore, this non stable urban space reflects, as London will do with the Dog-Woman's body in *Sexing the Cherry*, the nature of Villanelle's monstrous corporeality. As Pasolini and Vallorani comment, the city is in fact a reflection of the metamorphic and non-normative territory of the monstrous, hybrid body, as

Il contesto urbano liquido, mutevole, ingannevole, leggendario e surreale rispecchia perfettamente il corpo ossimorico di Villanelle (umano e animale, magico ma reale, femminile ma con tratti somatici maschili) così come la modalità narrativa del realismo magico, attraverso cui si realizza "the forced relationship of irreconcilable terms [...] the inherent inclusion of contradictory elements" (Bowers 2004, p. 1)⁷⁶⁶ che si sposa con le istanze polemiche e trasgressive tipiche dei testi di Winterson.⁷⁶⁷

Vice versa, in *Sexing the Cherry*, the grotesque, Bakhtinian nature of the female body of the Dog-Woman reflects the disorder and the carnivalesque

⁷⁶⁴ Winterson, Jeanette, *The Passion*, London: Bloomsbury Press, 1987, p.114

⁷⁶⁵ Ivi, p. 49

⁷⁶⁶ Bowers, Maggie Ann, *Magic (al) realism*. Routledge, 2004.

⁷⁶⁷ "The liquid, changing, deceptive, legendary and surreal urban context perfectly reflects Villanelle's oxymoronic body (human and animal, magical but real, female but with male features) as well as the narrative technique of magical realism, through which "the forced relationship of irreconcilable terms [...] the inherent inclusion of contradictory elements" (Bowers 2004, p.1) is realised, and which matches the polemical and transgressive instances typical of Winterson's texts." [my translation] in Pasolini, Anna; Vallorani, Nicoletta, *Corpi magici. Scritture incarnate dal fantastico alla fantascienza*, (Italian Edition). Mimesis Edizioni, 2020, Kindle Edition, p. 55

atmosphere from 17th century London. In a different way, thus, fluidity as an in-becoming process and main characteristic of the female monster is an aspect that distinguishes not only Villanelle, but also the Dog-Woman. As Clara Mucci observes in her essay *Il teatro delle streghe*⁷⁶⁸, the Modern Age London was characterised by a female ambiguity and by a fluid, chaotic, fertile nature. Therefore, if fluidity may be considered as a monstrous pattern and as an anti-monolithic characteristic for Venice and for the monstrous corporeal experiences that inhabit it, this pattern can be transferred as well to the city of London, since as Mucci states, there was a charge in the 17th London that made its inhabitants think of the city as a female, transforming, monstrous, unclassifiable body:

i vorticosi cambiamenti della città e del periodo fanno sì che Londra si caratterizzi nella mentalità del tempo e dei cittadini indelebilmente con una personificazione femminile e quindi, per quanto attraente e potente, fondamentalmente caotica, pericolosa, diabolica, da controllare e reprimere. [...] La città è, nella sua pericolosa rappresentazione come caos ed eccesso, femminilizzata [...] [N]elle ricorrenti allusioni alla fertilità della terra bagnata dal fiume Tamigi riconosciamo quella naturalità ambigua e facile alle 'contaminazioni' in senso antropologico e quella pericolosa fluidità che sono caratteristiche tipiche del femminile secondo la costruzione culturale dell'epoca.⁷⁶⁹

Within the scenario described by Mucci, then, it is easy to identify the Dog-Woman from *Sexing the Cherry* as the perfect prototype of a *freak* that at the same time incarnates this spirit of change and chaotic transformation that the city of London was experiencing during the Elizabethan Age. As I already mentioned, both *Sexing the Cherry* and *The Passion* are novels set in two transitional historical ages, in which the constituted system, characterised by a process of revision, generates a crisis within the structures of power. As the atmosphere of

⁷⁶⁸ Mucci, Clara. *Il teatro delle streghe: il femminile come costruzione culturale al tempo di Shakespeare*. Liguori, 2001.

⁷⁶⁹ "The whirling changes of the city and the period mean that London is indelibly characterised in the mentality of the time and of the citizens with a feminine personification. Therefore, although attractive and powerful, London is fundamentally chaotic, dangerous, diabolical, to be controlled and repressed. [...] The city is, in its dangerous representation as chaos and excess, feminised. [...] [I]n the recurring allusions to the fertility of the land bathed by the river Thames we recognise that ambiguous naturalness which is easy to 'contaminate' in the anthropological sense and that dangerous fluidity which are typical characteristics of the feminine according to the cultural construction of the time." [my translation] Ivi, pp. 13-15

Sexing the Cherry shows, in fact, the 17th century was a period characterised by scientific discoveries, travelling expeditions to the colonised territories of the recently-discovered American continent, cultural changes and intercultural connections. The grotesque female character of the Dog-Woman, then, as well as Villanelle in her Venice, has to be read by considering Mary Douglas' interpretative lens of the nexus between the body and the world, whereas the body is considered as a model for each bounded system, and «its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious.»⁷⁷⁰

The giant, grotesque body of the Dog-Woman not only responds to the Bakhtinian paradigm of grotesque as an in-becoming, carnivalesque process, but it also echoes Fevvers' body from *Nights at the Circus*, responding to Mary Russo's re-interpretation of the female grotesque. Her name, Dog-Woman, refers to the kind of work that she does, as she trains dogs for racing. Her own description of herself evidences the exaggerating ugliness and non-conformity of her body:

My nose is flat, my eyebrows are heavy. I have only a few teeth and those are a poor show, being black and broken. I had smallpox when I was a girl and the caves in my face are home enough for fleas. But I have fine blue eyes that see in the dark.⁷⁷¹

Another trait of the grotesque, Rabelaisian strength of the Dog-Woman is her hyperbolic strength, such as when she launches an elephant from the circus in the sky. Furthermore, she reflects on how her condition of she-monster has always isolated her since she was a child, and how people look at her with fear both because of her animalesque traits and because of her physical dimension:

It is a responsibility for a woman to have forced an elephant into the sky. What it says of my size I cannot tell, for an elephant looks big, but how am I to know what it weighs? A balloon looks big and weighs nothing. When I was a child my father swung

⁷⁷⁰ Mary Douglas quoted in Louis Adrian Montrose, "The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text," in *Literary Theory/Renaissance Texts*, ed. Patricia Parker and David Quint, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986

⁷⁷¹ Winterson, Jeanette, *Sexing the cherry*. Random House, 2014., pp. 24-25

me up on to his knees to tell me a story and I broke both his legs. He never touched me again, except with the point of the whip he used for the dogs.⁷⁷²

The physical traits of the Dog-Woman make her both a freak and a monster.⁷⁷³ Even her surrealistic adventure such as the scene in which she launches an elephant from the circus, is a Rabelaisian intertextual allusion to *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Her hyperbolic physical nature does not correspond and contrast with the grotesque coined by Bakhtin as she is a virgin mother, not having given birth to Jordan but rather adopting him, and she has never had the necessity of depending on men. Although for Bakhtin the womb represents fertility and birth, in Winterson's Dog-Woman the conventionally Bakhtinian elements of female grotesqueness contrast with the character's refusal and defiance of male power, as shown in the scene where she defies the Puritans, representing the male 17th century dominant, patriarchal society, and slaughters them mercilessly.⁷⁷⁴

She also helps the prostitutes from London's brothels to get rid of the Puritans' corpses. Notice how the space of heterotopia, in this case the brothel where the Dog-Woman kills men, contributes to help the embodied alterity, i.e. the grotesque woman, to get rid of the patriarchy which is, in this case, embodied by the Puritans. As Susana Onega observes, the Dog-Woman is a challenge to the patriarchal system itself, as she

expresses [her] perfect autonomy and wholeness. Her existence challenges the definition of woman in Lacanian terms as 'absolute other', as the mirror in which man can define 'himself unlike women under the patriarchal system, she does not need man to achieve a self-determination and therefore is not worried about failing to conform to the ideal of corporeal beauty devised by men.⁷⁷⁵

⁷⁷² Ibid.

⁷⁷³ Martin, Sara, "The Power of Monstrous Women: Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Jeanette Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* (1989)." *Journal of Gender Studies* 8.2, 1999, pp. 193-210., p. 201

⁷⁷⁴ Winterson, Jeanette, *Sexing the cherry*. Random House, 2014., p. 84

⁷⁷⁵ Onega Jaén, Susana, "Jeanette Winterson's Politics of Uncertainty in *Sexing the Cherry*." *Postmodern Studies*, 1996: 297-313., p. 304

Both Venice and London, as we saw, are response to the marginal corporealities of their two inhabitants, Villanelle and the Dog-Woman, and these two cities present both spaces of the norm and spaces of the margin. While these latter spaces are occupied by anti-normative identities, I agree with Antosa's interpretation of the place as 'site of performativity', paraphrasing Butler's idea that gender is constituted by a series of repeated actions.⁷⁷⁶

As we could already observe in chapter one by means of Gayle Rubin's drawing of the wall (figure 2, Chapter 1), gender differences and gender roles to be performed (and thus what is considered 'normal' and 'abnormal') are spatially organised. Antosa takes up the concept of 'heterosexualisation of spaces' by geographer Gill Valentine, suggesting how spaces, as much as gendered performances, undergo a process of normalization and anti-normalization that occurs through repetition and regulation. Therefore, Antosa claims,

mentre le persone queer sono pienamente consapevoli della natura performativa delle identità e degli spazi in cui vivono, spesso le persone eteronormative ne sono invece inconsapevoli, poiché raramente esse necessitano di riflettere e disaminare la performatività della loro stessa sessualità.⁷⁷⁷

4.3. Transhuman narratives and post-monstrous corporealities in Jeanette Winterson's writing: the experiment in *Frankissstein*

Before focusing on the main case study of comparative interest in this chapter, namely Jeanette Winterson's most recent novel *Frankissstein*, published in 2019, it is important to notice how she had previously experimented and explored the topic of posthumanity and the limits of the anthropocentric perspective in her 2007 novel, *The Stone Gods*. Here, Winterson plays with four narrative scenarios in

⁷⁷⁶ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990, p. 33

⁷⁷⁷ "...while queer people are fully aware of the performative nature of the identities and the spaces in which they live, heteronormative people are often unaware of this, as they rarely need to reflect on and examine the performativity of their own sexuality." [my translation] Antosa, Silvia, "Identità queer e spazi della comunità tra teoria e fiction: i casi di Jeanette Winterson e Sarah Waters.", 2014, pp. 151-161., p. 154

which the same character, Billie Crusoe, lives within different ages and worlds, moving from the first section, named *Planet Blue*, in which the surviving inhabitants of the dying Planet Earth, now called Orbus, are looking for another planet to colonise, until the last section, *Wreck City*, which shows a post-apocalyptic peripheral space of London, the Wreck City, which has been occupied by all the outcasts of normative society, called the Central Power, who have been forgotten and abandoned by the capitalist-neoliberalist system in charge.

Although being defined by the critics as as an «unhortodox (...) attempt [by Winterson] to try her hand at science fiction,»⁷⁷⁸ Winterson clarifies the categorization of the usage of the science fictional genre: «Well, it is fiction, and it has science in it, and it is set (mostly) in the future, but the labels are meaningless. I can't see the point of labelling a book like a pre-packed supermarket meal. There are books worth a reading and books not worth reading. That's all.»⁷⁷⁹ This statement has to be considered even in the case of *Frankissstein*, due to its hybrid nature of historiographic metafiction, diary, novel, science fiction, parody and dystopia. Both *The Stone Gods* and *Frankissstein* adopt an intertextual narrative which not only manages to provide the structure a posthuman story, but it also establishes a dialogue between past and present, negotiating with ethics, culture and the relationship between time and space.

Both novels, *The Stone Gods*, published in 2006, and *Frankissstein*, published in 2019, deal with the topic of corporeality related with society and consumerism, although they provide two different but specular images of it. While, in fact, in *The Stone Gods*, it is possible to observe a society where “normative narcissism” triumphs throughout a late-capitalist usage of biotechnologies that can stop the aging process of the human body and has

⁷⁷⁸ Onega, Susana, "The Trauma Paradigm and the Ethics of Affect in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*." *Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary British Fiction*. Brill, 2011, pp. 265-298, p. 274

⁷⁷⁹ Langdon, Jo, "'A Thing May Happen and be a Total Lie': Artifice and Trauma in Tim O'Brien's Magical Realist Life Writing." *Life Writing* 14.3, 2017, pp. 341-355.

produced a new society where desire and ethics have been pledged to the neoliberal consumerism.⁷⁸⁰ As Luna Dolezal specifies, in fact, in *The Stone Gods*

sexuality is fluid and gender roles are ambiguous and interchangeable (...) However, as in *Written on the Body*, the systematic patriarchal tendencies of technology and medicine overshadow the possibilities for playfulness and ambiguity within gender and sexuality. Even in this post-gender, post-gay and posthuman feminist utopia, where women are not burdened with child bearing (babies are born by means of a “womb free” technology) or domestic responsibilities (robots called 'LoBots', 'Flying Feet', and 'Kitchenhands' do housework and run errands), there is still a high level of gendered control and disempowerment in the society's use of technology, particularly those technologies which work on the body.⁷⁸¹

A perfect example of this statement by Dolezal on the consumerist, patriarchal image of sexuality in Winterson's novel is given by the story of a woman, Mrs. Pink, who wishes to be genetically reversed at the age of twelve years old in order to avoid that her husband may satisfy his paedophilic fantasies with other girls. In particular, she aims to look like Little Señorita, a twelve-year old pop singer who has already been fixed at the age of twelve in order to exploit her fame as eternal pre-adolescent singer. As Billie, the main character from the section *Planet Blue*, explains that bodily modification has also influenced the ethics of the new mankind where paedophilic fantasy has become a fetish: «I have an appointment with a woman who to be genetically reversed to twelve years old to stop her husband running after schoolgirls. It's possible, but it's legal.»⁷⁸² Billie, the protagonist of the novel, observes and judges as a spectator the life of the Central Power, the city where she works as surgeon at the Enhancement Services.

A point of conjunction between *The Stone Gods* and *Frankissstein* is Winterson's look on how cosmetic surgery, such as vaginoplastic or breast implants, mainly reifies the mainstream heterosexual male desire, and therefore, by doing so, biotechnology produces a «negative heterosexual patriarchal

⁷⁸⁰ Dolezal, Luna, "The body, gender, and biotechnology in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*." *Literature and medicine* 33.1, 2015, pp. 91-112.

⁷⁸¹ Ivi, p. 92

⁷⁸² Winterson, Jeanette, *The Stone Gods: A Novel*, HMH, 2009, p. 9

dynamics, where women are figured as passive, receptive, and dominated, while men are active, self-determining and productive.»⁷⁸³

In *Frankissstein*, an example of this industrial exploitation of the female body in order to satisfy the masculine heterosexual fantasy is given by the character of Ron Lord, an alter-ego to Lord Byron, who has become rich by selling sexbots. His point justifies an exploitation of the artificial female body for fetishising fantasies in order to adopt the masculine heteronormative necessity of sexual satisfaction without violating the sacrality of marriage:

Yeah. I have based my franchise model on the rent-a-car business. Pick up in one city, drop off in another. And I've got five styles of XX-BOTs – including the Economy model here on the couch. She's the cheapest. She's got nylon hair, so you can get a bit of static, and she whirrs a bit, but she's a good, straightforward, no-frills, budget fuck. See? Three holes all the same size. No! Not in the same place! [...]

Now concentrate – put your finger in there! Like it? And they all VI-BRATE! Any hole, any position. Vibrate! Nice limb movement too. You can position her how you want. All the girls have an extra-wide splayed-leg position. It's popular with our clients, especially the fat ones. This one can talk too. Limited but adequate voice response – like meeting a girl abroad who doesn't speak much English.⁷⁸⁴

Ron Lord represents the exact counterpart of the other main character from the novel, Victor Stein, who has a transhumanist approach to science and who believes that Artificial Intelligence represents the safety for knowledge. He presents his thought and philosophical belief during his TED-talk:

Some people wonder: whose side are you on? He'd say there are no sides – that binaries belong to our carbon-based past. The future is not biology – it's AI.

He has a nice, clear graphic up on his screen: Type 1 Life: Evolution-based. Victor explains: Changes happen slowly over millennia.

Type 2 Life: Partially self-designing. This is where we are now. We can develop our own brain software through learning, including outsourcing to machines. We update ourselves individually and generationally. We can adapt within a generation to a changing world – think of toddlers and iPads. We have invented machines of every kind for travel and labour. Horses and hoes are a thing of the past. We can also overcome some of our biological limitations: spectacles, eye-laser, dental implants,

⁷⁸³ Dolezal, Luna, "The body, gender, and biotechnology in Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*." *Literature and medicine* 33.1, 2015, pp. 91-112., pp. 99-100

⁷⁸⁴ Winterson, Jeanette, *Frankissstein: A Love Story*, Penguin Random House. 2019, p. 40-41

hip replacements, organ transplants, prosthetics. We have begun to explore space. Type 3 Life: Fully self-designing. [...] The nearby world of AI will be a world where the physical limits of our bodies will be irrelevant. Robots will manage much of what humans manage today. Intelligence – perhaps even consciousness – will no longer be dependent on a body. We will learn to share the planet with non-biological life forms created by us. We will colonise space.⁷⁸⁵

Frankissstein was published in 2019, and it was selected as finalist book at the Man Booker Prize 2019. In her review for the Los Angeles Review of Books, Elena Sheppard uses the statement from the novel evidencing that «Frankenstein was the name of the doctor, not the monster», in order to underline that in Winterson's retelling of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* the boundaries between humanity and monstrosity, as well as the boundaries between normative and non-normative bodies, constantly blur and mix up with each other. «Winterson's novel», Sheppard explains,

takes that truth and scrambles it. *Frankenstein* was the doctor, but he was the monster too, as was Shelley, as was Ry [Mary Shelley's contemporary, transgender alter-ego and main character from the novel], as are we all. The human condition is flawed and in building the artificial intelligence that will dominate the future, we are at once creating a monster and becoming one. Time is flat. Consciousness is endless. Life is simultaneous.⁷⁸⁶

As Ercan Gürova observes in his recent study of *Frankissstein*⁷⁸⁷, Winterson makes use of an expedient typical of postmodernism already adopted earlier in his novels, that Gürova defines as 'temporal disorder', just as the use of historiographic metafiction returns in *Frankissstein* as well to attempt to reproduce and narrate, through a first-person narrative, Mary Shelley's experience as a writer, intellectual and partner and her stay at Villa Diodati in 1816, where *Frankenstein* was first conceived.

⁷⁸⁵ Ivi, pp.72-73

⁷⁸⁶ Sheppard, Helena, Reanimating “Frankenstein”: On Jeanette Winterson’s “Frankissstein”, Los Angeles Review of Books, October 23, 2019 (<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/reanimating-frankenstein-on-jeanette-wintersons-frankissstein/>)

⁷⁸⁷ Gürova, Ercan, “Winterson’s *Frankissstein*: Postmodernism blended with a 19th-century style philosophical look”. Eurasian Journal of English Language and Literature, 3(1), pp. 235-244, p. 238

As in the case of *The Stone Gods* and *Sexing the Cherry*, therefore, Winterson overlaps the temporal dimension, making the character of a given timeline respond to its alter-ego from another timeline within the same novel. By doing so, Billie Crusoe from *The Stone Gods* experiences different lives while keeping the same characterial traits. Similarly, the grotesque Dog-Woman from the 17th-century-London in *Sexing the Cherry* has evolved into a contemporary-age ecoterrorist, who claims to hide a monstrous giantess under her skin and uses a Bakhtinian laughter to scare men. In this way, the monstrous woman from 17th-century-London can also be read as a metaphor for an uncontrollable representation of the female agency which menaces the patriarchal and capitalist system:

I am a woman going mad. I am a woman hallucinating. I imagine I am huge, raw, a giant. When I am a giant I go out with my sleeves rolled up and my skirts swirling round me like a whirlpool. I have a sack such as kittens are drowned in and I stop off all over the world filling it up. Men shoot at me, but I take the bullets out of my cleavage and I chew them up. Then I laugh and laugh and break their guns between my fingers the way you would a wish-bone.⁷⁸⁸

Therefore, this feeling of simultaneity in *Frankissstein* is suggested by the parallel narration that is developed by Winterson. On one hand, there is a plotline set in 19th century, where Mary Shelley's creative process is shown, a process that brought her to conceive *Frankenstein* at Villa Diodati, in Switzerland, at Byron's house, in 1816. On the other hand, instead, the story follows Mary Shelley's 21st century transgender alter-ego, a doctor named Ry Shelley (born as Mary Shelley), who presents themselves as grotesque/monstrous character once declaring their condition of 'hybrid' being. Both in the 19th century and in the 21st century plot there are characters who have a parodised, allegorical counterpart. While we have Ry Shelley, the main character from the novel, there is also Victor Stein (an alter ego to Victor Frankenstein from Shelley's 1818 eponymous novel); Ron Lord, an alter ego to Lord Byron; Polly D., a *Vanity Fair* journalist investigating on Victor Stein's researchs; Claire, a religious and moralist woman

⁷⁸⁸ Winterson, Jeanette, *Sexing the cherry*. Random House, 2014., p. 138

who corresponds to Claire Clairmont, Mary Shelley's stepsister, and who falls in love with Ron Lord, as Claire Clairmont did with Lord Byron in 19th century.

The materiality of the body, its malleability and capacity to be transformed and adapted according to identity or to the logics of capitalistic consumerism of the sex industry is a central topic in Winterson's novel and an attempt to re-actualise the myth of Frankenstein as the dead corpse brought to life (as well as the automaton to be controlled by the Eye of the Master/Creator that I have investigated in Chapter Two). For this reason, the posthuman and the cybernetics in *Frankissstein* overcome the limits of the human body, bound to the abject process of rotting (n.b.: for Kristeva the corpse is the utmost of abjection, as we saw in Chapter One) whose limits nourish an imagery of Gothic horror that constitutes the basis for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The monster from *Frankenstein* is, indeed, the most extreme form of abjection because of his organic, undead materiality, namely a corpse brought back from death to life and assembled in a laboratory. Vice versa, in *Frankissstein*, we notice Victor Stein's aim is to reach the status of immortality through the help of digital means, while overcoming the limits of the corporeal materiality, (and fallibility) and giving to the data collected from the cybernetic database he has created the potential of immortality that the organic world, including the human body, would not have. Victor is trying, in fact, attempting to push away life-after-death from the monstrous fallibility and abjection of the bodies.

Monstrosity as difference related to corporeality and as queer pattern is represented in the novel by the character of Ry Shelley, a female-to-male transgender doctor, who describes themselves as the result of an in-between, hybrid process. This condition does automatically provide the body of Ry with a grotesque metamorphic status according to the heteronormative binary parameters, which we had already observed in Bakhtin's theorization, and which is expressed by Ry as follows: «I am liminal, cusping, in-between, emerging,

undecided, transitional, experimental, a start up (or is it up-start?) in my own life.»⁷⁸⁹

Victor Frankenstein sees in the transsexual body of Ry Shelley the ideal incarnation of transhumanism, due to the in-becoming nature of Ry themselves, a non-binary person.⁷⁹⁰ Similarly, it is possible to interpret the fascination that Stein has for Ry Shelley as the embodiment of the life-after-death potentiality that Victor Frankenstein saw in his monster, the same potentiality that later scares him once he becomes aware of the possibility for the creature to become an acting subject, and not a passive other. At the same time, however, we may assist to an attempt by Victor Stein to objectify Ry Shelley's body into the category of monstrosity, whereas he reads Ry's in-between condition as an in-potency signal of the body from the future. This objectifying parallelism is suggested by Winterson in the section from the novel dedicated to Villa Diodati, where, during a lecture by P.B. Shelley of Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Mary Shelley reflects on the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, and her mind gets stimulated to reflect both on the relationship between living things and inanimate ones, and on the relationship between the notions of 'monster' and 'creature' (and the erotic charge that this relationship brings within):

Shelley read out to me from Ovid the story of the sculptor Pygmalion, who fell in love with the statue he had carved himself. So deep in love was he with his creation that women were nothing to him. He prayed to the goddess Athena that he might find a living lover as beautiful as the lifeless form on his bench. That night, he kissed the lips of the youth he had created. Hardly believing what he felt, he felt the youth kiss him in return. The cold stone warmed. [...]

The lips are warm after death, said Shelley. Who does not lie beside the beloved all night as the body cools? Who does not hold the body in her arms, frantic to bestow heat and reanimate the corpse? Who does not tell himself that this is but winter? In the morning surely the sun will come? [...]

⁷⁸⁹ Winterson, Jeanette, *Frankissstein: A Love Story*, Penguin Random House. 2019, p. 29

⁷⁹⁰ Shaojing, Lin, "Another Humanist Ideal: The Transhuman Future in Frankissstein: A Love Story." *Forum for World Literature Studies*. Vol. 13. No. 1. Wuhan Guoyang Union Culture & Education Company, 2021.

Artificial life. The statue wakes and walks. But what of the rest? Is there such a thing as artificial intelligence? Clockwork has no thoughts. What is the spark of mind? Could it be made? Made by us?⁷⁹¹

After these reflections on artificial intelligence and the potentialities and the risks within it, Mary questions herself on how to structure her ghost story at Villa Diodati. In fact, the scene is set in the 1816, when Mary Shelley, her husband P.B. Shelley, Lord Byron and John Polidori challenged each other to write a ghost story. Therefore, after discovering from a villager about the legend of an alchemist named Conrad Dippel, whose «beloved wife died and, unable to bear his loss, he refused to bury her, determined to discover the secret of life»⁷⁹², Mary conceives the structure of her anti-hero, rethinking her own ideology on after life and her personal experience with death:

I will call my hero (is he a hero?) Victor – for he seeks victory over life and over death. He will strive to penetrate the recesses of Nature. He will not be an alchemist – I want no hocus-pocus here – he will be a doctor, like Polidori, like Doctor Lawrence. He will discern the course of the blood, know the knot of muscle, the density of bone, the delicacy of tissue, how the heart pumps. Airways, liquids, mass, jelly, the cauliflower mystery of the brain. He will compose a man, larger than life, and make him live. I will use electricity. Storm, Spark, Lightning. I will rod him with fire like Prometheus. He will steal life from the gods. At what cost? His creature will have the strength of ten men. The speed of a galloping horse. The creature will be more than human. But he will not be human. Yet he suffers. Suffering, I do believe, is something of the mark of the soul. Machines do not suffer. My creator will not be a madman. He will be a visionary. A man with family and friends. Dedicated to his work. I will take him to the brink and make him leap. I will show his glory as well as his horror. I will call him Victor Frankenstein.⁷⁹³

Mary Shelley, in prefiguring the story of Frankenstein, already conceives of the critical problems of the character: she questions his identity as a hero («is he a hero?»⁷⁹⁴), just as she rejects the tradition of the fantastic and the surreal, typical of Romanticism, embracing the techno-scientific imaginary in delineating the

⁷⁹¹ Ivi, pp. 60-61

⁷⁹² Ivi, p. 65

⁷⁹³ Ivi, pp. 67-68

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid.

figure of a visionary scientist who plans to create an embodied alternative to death and the degradation of organic matter. Mary also captures the posthuman potential of the Creature, considering it to be an overcoming of humanity as such and therefore, in its nature transcending death, making it a monstrous and abject being. The same anthropocentric perspective professed by Victor Frankenstein is anticipated by the undermining of his own thinking when Mary imagines the entire narrative parable of the character, «I will take him to the brink and make him leap. I will show his glory as well as his horror.»⁷⁹⁵

It is important to notice how in *Frankissstein* monstrosity, together with the idea of bodily manipulation, is related to Victor Stein's researchs as well as to Ry Shelley's corporeality. In this regard, through the novel the transgender body of Ry Shelley is constantly transformed into an object of analysis and targeted with transphobic observations. This occurs with Ron Lord (a Lord Byron's alter ego), who does not understand Ry's in-between condition and constantly invisibilises their non-binary identity, by Claire (a Claire Clairmont's alter ego), a devoted Christian and supports biological determinism, and by the rapist who sexually abuses of Ry in a public toilet, attracted and repulsed by his surgically modified body:

I thought: I'm going to get beaten up or raped. Which is worse? I didn't have to make that decision because he pushed me into the stall, slammed the door shut and forced me up against it. He fumbled with his zip and pulled his dick out, wanking himself half-hard. THIS IS THE REAL DEAL YOU FUCKIN' DYKE FAGGOT. YOU WANT IT? No. You're getting it anyways. He pushed his hand under my shirt. YOU FUCKIN' FREAK! YOU HAD YOUR TIT SLASHED OFF? NO TITS. NO DICK. FUCKIN' FREAK!⁷⁹⁶

Victor Stein himself is both erotically and scientifically attracted by the otherness that Ry's body represents for him, and this aspect is evidenced when he sees Ry's naked body and exposes it to a careful, almost clinical analysis, which Ry describes with the word 'scanning'⁷⁹⁷: «...then he spread his hand,

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁶ Ivi, p. 242

⁷⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 119

thumb and fingers on either side of my collarbone. As though he was scanning me». ⁷⁹⁸ Even during their sexual intercourse that follows this previously mentioned scene, Stein does nothing but underlining the transgender alterity that Ry's body represents to him, while touching the scars from Ry's surgically removed breasts, and observing Ry's engorged clitoris that has increased its dimension due to Ry's testosterone injections. Moreover, notice how during their intercourse Victor specifies «I'm not gay.» ⁷⁹⁹ I would interpret this abnegation and necessity to normalise his sexual desire as related to an inner tendency by Victor to revindicate his heteronormative condition and to take distance from the ambiguity evoked by Ry Shelley's body, which stands in the middle between Ry's previous female biological nature and Ry's actual condition of transgender, non-binary person. Shelley, in fact, declares that this in-between condition is what they have always hoped for themselves. When Victor asks Shelley «Why are you so easy in your body?», Ry answers «Because it really is my body. I had it made for me.» ⁸⁰⁰

This explicits the necessity for Ry to be legitimated as a posthuman, non-stable entity, and how this new condition of connection between mind and body is the closest version of themselves to their identity. Therefore, this is the occasion for Victor Stein to restate his scientific need of classifying Shelley's body as representation of otherness, while defining it as a 'delicious new data to analyze' ⁸⁰¹.

Transgender identity, thus, is depicted in Winterson's *Frankissstein* as a monstrous experience of corporeality, as shown by the reaction of cisgender people to Ry's body and gender identity. As shown in Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, the manipulated body appears as an artificial alternative to the

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid. For a more detailed understanding of the use of 'trans' terminology, see Gerardo Rodríguez Salas's article *Frankenstein's Creature's Self-Portrait: Transgender Politics in Man Into Woman and The Danish Girl*, forthcoming in *Atlantis: A Journal of the Spanish Association for Anglo-American Studies*.

⁸⁰⁰ Ivi, p.122

⁸⁰¹ Ibid.

normative one, even in the case of Evelyn, who is transformed into a conventional, hyperbolic beauty functional to the masculine gaze and the male desire, although his dysmorphia makes him a *freak*, a man into a woman's body; in other words, a transgender person. Similarly, this double-binding of transsexuality and monstrosity has been widely explored by feminist and queer criticism, as in Susan Stryker autobiographical manifesto, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing the Transgender Rage*.⁸⁰² Here, the transgender American artist and activist has developed a conscious narration and performance of her experience as a transgender woman, while also exploring a transgender aesthetics and the inherent diversity of trans people according to the normative standards. «My idea» Stryker explains, «was to perform self-consciously a queer gender rather than simply talk about it, thus embodying and enacting the concept simultaneously under discussion.» In other terms, Stryker compares her transgender identity to monstrosity, and by extension, refers to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, quoting from the very title of her essay the famous encounter between Victor and the Creature above the Chamounix's glacier. Stryker's usage of monstrosity as a category for the transgender experience aims to provide monstrosity of the same revindicating power that words like 'dyke', 'faggot', 'queer', and 'whore' have acquired within the LGBTQIA+ community, and within other anti-assimilationist minorities. As Stryker declares, she wants to revindicate monstrosity as a 'weapon' term, as for the aforementioned words used to identify difference-as-inferiority, and while criticising the Western cultural imagery that has identified the notion of 'creature' as the embodiment of a lack:

I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself. I will say this as bluntly as I know how: I am a transsexual, and therefore I am a monster. Just as the words "dyke," "fag," "queer," "slut," and "whore" have been reclaimed, respectively, by lesbians and gay men, by anti-assimilationist sexual minorities, by women who pursue erotic pleasure, and by sex industry workers, words like "creature," "monster," and "unnatural" need to be reclaimed by the transgendered. By embracing and accepting them, even piling one on top of another, we may dispel their ability to harm us. A creature, after all, in the dominant tradition of Western European culture, is

⁸⁰² Stryker, Susan, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*. New York University Press, 1996.

nothing other than a created being, a made thing. The affront you humans take at being called a “creature” results from the threat the term poses to your status as “lords of creation,” beings elevated above mere material existence. As in the case of being called “it,” being called a “creature” suggests the lack or loss of a superior personhood. I find no shame, however, in acknowledging my egalitarian relationship with non-human material Being; everything emerges from the same matrix of possibilities. “Monster” is derived from the Latin noun *monstrum*, “divine portent,” itself formed on the root of the verb *monere*, “to warn.” It came to refer to living things of anomalous shape or structure, or to fabulous creatures like the sphinx who were composed of strikingly incongruous parts, because the ancients considered the appearance of such beings to be a sign of some impending supernatural event. Monsters, like angels, functioned as messengers and heralds of the extraordinary. They served to announce impending revelation, saying, in effect, “Pay attention; something of profound importance is happening.”⁸⁰³

Stryker, therefore, associates transsexuality and monstrosity as categories that overcome the normative, anthropocentric necessity of distancing of the normal subject, from the other “creatures”, rather embracing the condition of 'being-a-creature-like'.

Similarly, in Winterson's *Frankissstein* monstrosity, that was a central theme in Mary Shelley's original literary source, is here attributed mainly to the organic bodies which have been modified according to science and hormones, namely to Ry Shelley's body, who is both a monstrous body and a sentient being that recognises the non-normative complexity of their corporeality and revindicates it as a new identitary frontier, while also defending their own identity. As Victor Stein states, «science is no longer convinced that Homo Sapiens is a special case».⁸⁰⁴ Therefore, Stein's objective is to evolve from dead bodies as testing grounds on which he can experiment his theories on a future beyond the imperfection (and monstrosity) of organic matter. His opinion is that a posthuman world is the answer to the problem of the human race not being «a best possible outcome».⁸⁰⁵

We have, thus, on one side the representation of an embodied monstrosity epitomised by Ry Shelley's transsexuality, constantly underlined by the other

⁸⁰³ Ivi, p. 246

⁸⁰⁴ Winterson, Jeanette, *Frankissstein: A Love Story*, Penguin Random House. 2019, p. 79

⁸⁰⁵ Ivi, p. 74

characters' homophobic statements, and on the other side a purified, posthuman experience of identity ad planned by Victor Stein.

Once out of the body you will be able to choose any form you like, and change it as often as you like. Animal, vegetable, mineral. The gods appeared in human form and animal form, and they changed others into trees or birds. Those were stories about the future. We have always known that we are not limited to the shape we inhabit.⁸⁰⁶

The materiality of the body is functional to Victor's experimentation in order to reach a non-material future made of data, which survive to the material process of decomposition. Victor does, in fact, recognise the limits of the human flesh, but he also considers the necessity of its usage for his experiments:

Of course, says Victor, what I would prefer is to be able to upload myself, that is, upload my consciousness, to a substrate not made of meat. At present, though, that is not an effective way to prolong life because the operation to scan and copy the contents of my brain will kill me.⁸⁰⁷

Dr. Stein figures out a future where consciousness will transform itself into a boundary-crossing, «global, multicultural, less rooted, less dependent on our immediate history of family or country to shape ourselves».⁸⁰⁸ Such condition will make the importance of situatedness and contextualization of consciousness as obsolete concepts and interpretations of reality.

It is interesting, then, how in the novel the relationship between Ry Shelley and Victor Stein starts as Dr. Shelley provides dead bodies for experimental usage to Victor Stein. According to Ry Shelley's considerations, a corpse represents the utmost of unnaturalness, a statement that echoes Kristeva's idea of abjection that I have widely mentioned before. Therefore, bodies are functional to Victor Stein's transhuman project, as Shelley explains:

⁸⁰⁶ Ivi, p. 115

⁸⁰⁷ Ivi, p. 110

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid.

After dissection, in the old days, the human remains might be ground up as bonemeal, or rendered into candles, or fed to the pigs. There was no waste. You could say that burial is a waste – at least the way it's done these days, in solid caskets, worm-proof, rain-proof, anything to stop the natural processes of death. Death is natural. Yet nothing looks more unnatural than a dead body.

[...]

The doctor of the future will be a robot. But skin is skin, and flesh is flesh, and you can't learn anatomy from textbooks and videos. As long as there are bodies you will need a body. Body parts.⁸⁰⁹

Stein, therefore, as well as his Mary Shelley's original predecessor, Victor Frankenstein, is a pioneer of Enlightenment (or post-Enlightenment in the case of Victor Stein), life-after-death and life-beyond-the-body, and the flesh of the corpses is useful to both Frankenstein and Stein for their experiments. However, as Ry comments in Chapter 24, while waiting in Victor Stein's laboratory together with Claire and Polly D (Polidori's alter ego), although Victor Stein's perspective aims to overcome death and to adapt the fallibility of the human nature to the contemporary age and its technologies, there can be disadvantages deriving from the perspective of an eternal life and a mind that overcomes the decomposition of the organic matter of the human body. Ry claims, «Speaking as a doctor, I said, nothing we do to the body is without consequences. I wonder how our bodies will respond to any therapy that reverses its process of gradual dissolution?»⁸¹⁰ and the whole group revindicates the necessity of situatedness and physical existence also because related to a cultural, sexual, social, geographical, ethnical group:

If we ever did get out of the body, said Polly, if we were uploads, what would happen to online dating? I mean, there'd be no photographs of what we look like because we wouldn't look like anything. [...] There'd be no straight, gay, male, female, cis, trans. What happens to labels when there is no biology?

How do we even romance without labels? said Polly. We hate them but they're part of the attraction. Maybe not. Maybe we'd get to know someone and when we were

⁸⁰⁹ Ivi, pp. 86-87

⁸¹⁰ Ivi, p. 310

ready we'd download ourselves into a form and— We're not someone, though, are we? said Polly. We're no one.⁸¹¹

Therefore, the possibility of being 'no one' is not considered as a positive perspective for the bodiless future that Victor Stein aims to, and all the characters agree about the importance of revindicating the physicality of their own differences. The ending of the novel, in fact, suggests Winterson's alignment to this view, as Victor Stein's lab and his research on extracting the mind from the body and making it eternal collapse and there is no trace of Victor Stein, who allegedly has found death in his Manchester laboratory.

In 2021, after *Frankissstein's* publishing in 2019, Winterson published *12 Bytes*⁸¹², a collection of twelve short essays in which she attempted to provide an overview of contemporary society from her critical perspective, by looking at the perception of artificial intelligence and how it intersects with such concepts as technological progress, gender identity, love and body politics. In her essay, Winterson repeatedly declares herself in favour of transhumanism, seeing it as the only sensible way for society to achieve, as transhumanism must be seen as 'the path towards a fully post-human future'.

Aware of the legacy of Haraway's cyborg, according to whom the past is merely a memory of humankind, Winterson agrees that we, the new subjects "in the transhuman world to come, [...] will be hybrids, just as Dracula and Frankenstein's monster are hybrids"⁸¹³, and that nevertheless the survival of identity to bodily deterioration will not be a sufficient element to allow society to progress:

If we are still violent, greedy, intolerant, racist, sexist, patriarchal, and generally vile, really, what is the point of being able to open your garage with your finger and run

⁸¹¹ Ivi, p. 311

⁸¹² Winterson, Jeanette, *12 Bytes: How artificial intelligence will change the way we live and love*, Vintage, 2021, Kindle Edition.

⁸¹³ Ivi

faster than a cheetah? That's the vampire warning – maybe you do live forever, but your mindset is stuck in a medieval castle in Transylvania.⁸¹⁴

It is on this basis, in fact, that the representation of the social scenario in *Frankissstein* is based, since despite the hybridism of flesh and technology, there still is a survival of gender bias, stereotypes, misogyny, misgendering, classism and transphobia that can be traced back to the character of Ron Lord, who produces and projects robotic women that are nothing but de-humanised sex slaves at the service of heteronormative male consumerism.

In *12 Bytes*, Winterson lists a series of paradigmatic examples of women-robots within the male cultural imagery, such as Rosalba, the mechanised porcelain-doll from the film *Il Casanova*, by Federico Fellini, or Ira Levin's novel on the mechanical *Stepford Wives* (1972) which would later inspire 1975 Bryan Forbes' horror movie of the same name and a 2004 remake starring Nicole Kidman. Two other mentioned examples are Olimpia, the android-lady from E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story *Der Sandmann* (1816), and the mechanical woman in Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Eve Future*, and both these women could be considered as sources of inspiration (see Chapter 3) for Angela Carter in her novels *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* (1972) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977).

However, Winterson considers female sexbots as the male incarnation of 'alternative': "Alternatives to sex workers. Alternatives to a relationship with a woman. Alternatives to women."⁸¹⁵ When asked, then, what the problem with a sex doll might be, Winterson's answer is: "Three things. Money. Power. Gender roles."⁸¹⁶ The doll, unlike the sex worker, is the paroxysm of female sexual objectification, while the sex worker enacts a performance and claims her empowerment; the doll, on the contrary, embodies a pornographic fantasy of passivity that contradicts itself when placed in a transhuman scenario where the hybridisation of human and technology should dissolve hierarchies rather than

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replicate and re-actualise them. Ron Lord's character from *Frankissstein*, a pioneer of the sexbots industry, can be inserted as Winterson's critique of this trend. As Winterson states,

I am an enthusiast for AI – which I think of as alternative intelligence, and not artificial intelligence – but the sex bot question is not so much about a new technology as it is about backward-looking sexism and gender stereotyping. A 5-minute surf online will take you far from the pioneers of digisex, and down the manhole of a new and nasty way of spreading the age-old disease of misogyny.⁸¹⁷

Therefore, it is interesting to ask why Winterson chose Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as the starting point for developing a modern philosophical novel on the possibilities of a transhuman society. I think that in the chapter that opens *12 Bytes*, entitled “Love(lace) Actually”, it is possible to find an answer to this question: Winterson attributes to two women, Mary Shelley and Ada Lovelace, Lord Byron's daughter, the power to have given a beginning to the future in an era marked by the Industrial Revolution and technological progress.

While, in fact, Ada Lovelace is credited with having collaborated with the mathematician and philosopher Charles Babbage on the idea of the Analytical Engine, the world's first non-human computer, never realised, Winterson describes Mary Shelley's 1818 novel as ‘a message in a bottle’, seeing in *Frankenstein's* monster an input for transhumanist philosophy:

We are the first generation since that book was published, over 200 years ago, that is also beginning to create new life-forms. Like Victor Frankenstein's, our digital creations depend on electricity - but not on the rotting discards of the graveyard. Our new intelligence - embodied or non-embodied - is built out of the zeros and ones of code.⁸¹⁸

It is through these words that Winterson invites the reader to perceive the re-actualising potential of Mary Shelley's work, and how the discourse on bodies and identity begun in Victor Frankenstein's laboratory is in constant

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transformation, now granting a new narrative for the monster, who becomes the cornerstone of a new society rather than a threat to humankind.

4.4 Spaces of otherness in *Frankissstein*

Another key aspect in *Frankissstein* within the discourse on corporeality is the role of spaces and their functions as experimental areas for the manipulation of the body.

In *Frankissstein*, as in the other novels examined in this chapter written by Winterson like *The Passion*, the non-normative subjects oscillate between the spaces of centrality and the spaces of the margin, between urban areas and peripheral and hidden places, such as the Arizona desert or the laboratory in which Victor acts and dismembers corpses that will be functional to his investigations. The same public toilet at the service station where Ry is raped by a man who invisibilises his transgender corporeity by accusing him of being a "fucking dyke" is a place of the binary norm, that is, a male toilet, and is at the same time a space of liminality where the law is suspended and the law of the strongest prevails, and where gender roles are subverted and annulled.

In *Frankissstein*, as in the other novels examined in this chapter written by Winterson, the non-normative subjects oscillate between the spaces of centrality and the spaces of the margin, between urban areas and peripheral and hidden places, such as the Arizona desert or the laboratory in which Victor acts and dismembers corpses that will be functional to his investigations. The public toilet at the service station where Ry is raped by a man, who invisibilises his transgender corporeity by accusing them of being a "dyke faggot", can be both considered as a place of the binary norm, that is, a male toilet, and at the same time a space of liminality, where the law is suspended and the law of the strongest prevails, and where gender roles are subverted and annulled. At the same time, this place, as well as other scenarios in Winterson's novel where the concept of human being and gender identity are questioned and contested, can be considered not only as liminal scenarios, even if they are part of the normative

society, but as spaces of the margin, and therefore as corresponding to the definition of queer heterotopias coined by Angela Jones that we saw in Chapter 1, that is

radical post-human vision where nothing is fixed and there are no boundaries, and no hierarchies. These are spaces with no ordered categories that qualify and rank bodies. This will require the radical transformation of bodies, subversive performances, and transforming our minds, our souls, and our thoughts.⁸¹⁹

4.4.1 Alcor Foundation

One of the pivotal settings for the story, the Alcor Foundation in Phoenix, Arizona, is the place where corpses are adopted as material for investigation in order to further develop Victor Stein's research on life-after-death and cryogenics.

Alcor's ambition is to look at the future, as the CEO Max Moore explains to Ry once he goes there to meet Stein. Moore specifies that the name 'Alcor' comes from the star from the same name, which is «as far as future.»⁸²⁰

The experimental function and the secrecy of the experiments at the Alcor Foundation validate its condition as space of otherness within the normative space, i.e. heterotopia, especially if we consider that the Alcor Foundation is a morgue used as a laboratory. Here, the human body becomes an instrument, or rather, a raw material for scientific procedures of cryogenics, being manipulated in its organism and implemented with chemical devices. As Ry Shelley explains, this transhuman methodology is necessary to extend life endurance beyond the human body:

The medical team will access your major blood vessels and you will be connected to a perfusion machine that will remove your blood, and replace it with a chemical solution that prevents the formation of ice crystals in the cells of your body. You are going to be vitrified – not frozen. The process of filling you with cryoprotectant takes about four hours. Two small holes will be drilled in your skull so that brain perfusion can be observed. Then you will be further cooled over the next three hours to make

⁸¹⁹ Jones, Angela, "Queer heterotopias: Homonormativity and the future of queerness." *InterAlia: Pismo poświęcone studiom queer* 4, 2009, p. 15

⁸²⁰ Ivi, p. 105

sure that your suspended body is like glass, not ice. After two weeks you are ready for your final resting place – at least in this life.⁸²¹

4.4.2 Manchester, England

Manchester is the place where Ry Shelley and Victor Stein first meet and where Victor has his secret laboratory. The laboratory, as I already claimed in Chapter 2 referring to Victor Frankenstein's laboratory, is a place under the surface, where the scientist can experiment and where there is space only for scientific veridicity. When Stein first takes Ry Shelley to this place, Ry ironises on the secrecy of it, imagining that they are taking part to a "Subterranean Secret of the City." The emphasis on secrecy underlines the liminal status of Stein's private space. Stein's laboratory, in fact, set in old fallout shelters built during Cold War, is described as a quintessentially Gothic place, echoing Mary Shelley's novel's atmosphere, filled with unexplored, dark hallways, flickering neon lights, labyrinths, and old bunkers. Victor Stein himself introduces his place as a place of otherness, evidencing the difference from surface and the underworld where he and the other main characters are while entering into it:

Do not be alarmed by the slight feeling of seasickness. It is as though we are in a submarine. The city above us is moving and rocking and we sense it. Our air and electricity are dependent on generators and ventilators. This is a life-support system. [...] Has anybody ever explored the whole thing down here? said Ron. No, said Victor. No one can. There are dead-ends and blockages, turnings that lead nowhere. Bunkers, passageways, routes under the whole of Manchester. Victor opened a door. An intense blast of cold hit us. We went inside. We were in a room that appeared and vanished in its own icy fog. Now we glimpsed each other, like strangers, like watchers. Then we disappeared from sight like the dead. A bank of equipment lined one wall.⁸²²

At the end of the novel, Victor attempts to enact his plan, that is scanning a human dead brain in order to extract information from it and convert them into digital data which can be transferred on other database, but the laboratory collapses and both Victor and his experiments disappear. Hence, I agree with Gurova's

⁸²¹ Ivi, p. 104

⁸²² Ivi, p. 267

interpretation of Winterson's 2019 novel as an 'awareness-raising' and 'warning for future', in which the consequences of a transhumanist, bodiless, immortal utopia would bring to concrete changes within society, erasing the notions of death, reality, humanity and consciousness, and Winterson's acknowledgement that this process is unavoidable and can only be postponed. As Gürova concludes, «[b]y juxtaposing Shelley's process of creating a monster at the beginning of 19th century with Victor Stein's creating artificial life forms in the 21st century, Winterson reminds the reader the inevitable outcome which is imminent for humanity: the future.»⁸²³

4.4.3 Villa Diodati, Lake Geneva, Switzerland

Another space that I would here consider as the field for queer liminality is Villa Diodati, in Switzerland, in 1816, where both Mary Shelley and her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley are staying, as Lord Byron's guests.

Winterson describes the weather in 1816 and the Swiss, wet atmosphere as soggy with rain.

What we could see, the rocks, the shore, the trees, the boats on the lake, had lost their usual definition and blurred into the long grey of a week's rain. Even the house, that we fancied was made of stone, wavered inside a heavy mist and through that mist, sometimes, a door or a window appeared like an image in a dream. Every solid thing had dissolved into its watery equivalent.⁸²⁴

As we have seen above, Winterson uses water in *The Passion* as an element to indicate the fluidity of both the Venetian environments, which are unclassifiable by maps, and the identity and bodily fluidity of the novel's protagonist, Villanelle. Similarly, it is important to note how Winterson's attention in the novel's incipit is directed towards the Swiss climate and how it is perceived by Mary Shelley's 1st

⁸²³ Gürova, Ercan, "Winterson's *Frankissstein*: Postmodernism blended with a 19th-century style philosophical look". *Eurasian Journal of English Language and Literature*, 3(1), 235-244, p. 243

⁸²⁴ Ivi, p. iii

person narration, which pays attention to the element of water. This is because, as in *The Passion's Venice*, it is possible to imagine that Villa Diodati, the place where Frankenstein was conceived by Mary Shelley, is precisely a role where gender roles themselves, and thus the concepts of difference, subject and otherness, are subjected to a process of negotiation. The phrase «Every solid thing had dissolved into its watery equivalent»⁸²⁵ precisely evokes an interchange between those who inhabit the liminal space of Villa Diodati and the surrounding environment, dominated by a Gothic climate. It should also be remembered that the climate of 1816, known as the 'Year Without a Summer', which can be traced back to Mary Shelley's stay at Villa Diodati, as Shelley herself reported in the afterword to *Frankenstein* in 1831, was an unusual climate, a volcanic winter resulting from a series of atmospheric concomitances and natural disasters, including the eruption of the Tambora Volcano in Indonesia.⁸²⁶

In Winterson's novel, Mary Shelley is used to wandering naked in the humid air of the Swiss landscape. Thus, the background presented to us appears as preparatory to that Gothic tension which anticipates the nightmarish genesis underlying Mary Shelley's idea, and which Shelley herself testifies to in her 1831 *Afterword*. The climate and the atmospheric conditions that characterise the atypical environment provide the ideal setting for the design of a Gothic story. These factors help to turn Villa Diodati into a liminal place where the creativity of the challengers of the literary competition, that is to investigate the archetypes of horror, takes place. Here, then, the very subjects that inhabit that space are, in the year 1816 scenario, a group of outsiders, if compared to the standard moral and attitudes of the society they belong to: P. B. Shelley and Mary Godwin Shelley have run away together from the house of William Godwin. P. B. Shelley has left behind himself an unsuccessful marriage with Harriett Shelley, who committed suicide in an advanced state of pregnancy in the Serpentine River, allegedly because she could not bear the abandonment of her husband and the

⁸²⁵ Ibid.

⁸²⁶ Pfister, Christian, and Sam White, "A year without a summer, 1816." *The Palgrave Handbook of Climate History*. Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2018. 551-561.

subsequent scandal. With Mary and Percy Shelley there is also Claire Clairmont, Mary Shelley's half-sister, who in the meantime has embarked on an affair with Lord Byron.

It should also be remembered that Byron himself, due to his judicial vicissitudes in England, linked to rumours of his own bisexuality and accusations of adultery, homosexuality, and of having engaged in an incestuous relationship with his half-sister Augusta Leigh⁸²⁷. This had led Byron to antagonise the English aristocracy to such an extent that he had to seek refuge abroad by leaving the country. Villa Diodati therefore represents a place of liminality from which these characters and intellectuals, while benefiting from their privileges relative to their social class and the nation to which they belonged, formulated an investigation of horror, which only in Mary Shelley, at her first steps as an author, would lead to a complete literary product together with Polidori's novella, which would then take shape in the short story *The Vampyre*.

It is also interesting to note, in order to observe the intersection of spaces and their symbolic meanings in relation to those who occupy them, Winterson's use of an indirect parallelism in the novel between Victor Stein's laboratory, where the postmodern alter-egos of Mary Shelley, John Polidori, Claire Clairmont and Lord Byron, i.e. Ry Shelley, Polly D, Claire and Ron Lord, are gathered. On that occasion, it is Ry Shelley themselves who launch the input to the other characters, while asking: «Does anyone know any ghost stories?»⁸²⁸ Thus, the act of evoking the project of telling and inventing a ghost story in Villa Diodati emphasises the liminality of re-telling from the margins as practice of entertainment in both spaces, Villa Diodati on the one hand and Victor Stein's laboratory on the other.

This is because both the obscurities of the laboratory and the characters gathered there, as well as the guests of Villa Diodati and their isolation from normative society, occupy places of otherness from where to conceive narratives that

⁸²⁷ Badalamenti, Anthony F., "Why did Mary Shelley Write Frankenstein?." *Journal of Religion and Health* 45.3, 2006, pp. 419-439.

⁸²⁸ Winterson, Jeanette, *Frankissstein: A Love Story*, Penguin Random House. 2019, p. 309

investigate the relationships between identity, the body and horror that are at the genesis of Mary Shelley's 1816 novel.

Final considerations

In her preface to *Feminist Theory from margin to centre*⁸²⁹, African American activist and feminist bell hooks states that «to be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.» To explain this concept, bell hooks uses as a paradigmatic example the condition of social division that affects the African-American population in America, in particular the Kentucky rail track from where she comes from, associating physical places with the power to become spaces of confinement and separation between the norm and the anti-norm. As hooks explains, «the railroad tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face.»⁸³⁰ bell hooks also states that the only role allowed for people from the margins to be part of the centre was to hold positions that white inner city society considered subordinate and/or degrading: «we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity», further specifying how people from the margin could «enter that world but [. ...] could not live there [in the centre]», in order to «always [...] return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town».⁸³¹

I wanted to begin my conclusions by mentioning bell hooks' concept of margin because I believe that in her investigation of the role of the margin and the importance of feminist positioning it emerges the centrality of the relationship between space and corporeality, as well as the dichotomies of norm/centre and abnormality/margin. As it is possible to observe in the course of my research, the three authors I have examined have attempted to interpret, according to the spirit of their own times and their own social, cultural, historical and political backgrounds, both the aesthetic and social mutability relating to the concept of queer and female monstrosity, and how this monstrosity has been classified as such and defined by the dominant and heteronormative subject occupying the spaces of the centre.

⁸²⁹ bell hooks, *Feminist theory from margin to center*, South End Press, Boston, 1984

⁸³⁰ *Ivi*, p. i

⁸³¹ *Ibid.*

In this sense, the grotesque of Bakhtinian origin, later taken up by Mary Russo in *The Female Grotesque* (1995)⁸³², contributed to highlight the subversive charge of the hierarchical relations between centre and margin, as well as the relations between structures and figures of power/dominance and subordinate individualities. This discourse on the female grotesque by Russo, if approached in a specular key to the notion of abjection theorised by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982)⁸³³, has contributed not only to dismantle the fallibility and arbitrariness that has guided the Western socio-cultural imagination in delineating the concept of the monster from both a social and literary perspective, but it has also transformed the feminist monster into a figuration of resistance that has the power to contradict and counter-narrate, from its own liminal space, what is considered the norm and what is not.

I think it is useful to recall the expression used by Shirley Peterson of 'freaking feminism' in defining novels such as Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984) and Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983), works which are contemporary with each other, and which I would extend and apply here to the works of Jeanette Winterson and the analysed works of Mary Shelley. In the case of Shelley, although the definition of 'freaking feminism' is coined to refer to feminist authors of the 1970s, I think the definition can persist because it is with Mary Shelley that the monster acquired a political and anti-patriarchal identity. Both the monster and the freak challenge the aesthetic standards and the polarisation of male and female on which western patriarchal culture is based. Freaks, according to Peterson «function as sites of contradiction, challenging notions of stable identity and pointing to cultural dissonance.»⁸³⁴

At the same time, I find it appropriate to refer to Helene Cixous's essay *The Laugh of Medusa* in seeking in the term 'sexts' used by the French feminist philosopher a definition of the cultural, political and narrative intentions of Mary Shelley,

⁸³² Russo, Mary, *The female grotesque: risk, excess and modernity*. Routledge, 2012.

⁸³³ Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror*, University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 1982.

⁸³⁴ Peterson, Shirley, "Freaking Feminism. "The Life and Loves of a She-Devil and Nights at the Circus as Narrative Freak Shows '." in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the extraordinary Body*, New York University Press, 1996, pp. 291-301., p. 294

Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson. Cixous, in fact, defines 'sexts' as those «female-sexed texts» that «convert patriarchal fear of the feminine into female empowerment and force a confrontation with the illusion that underlies female otherness», implying that «this illusion, while reassuring some in their normality, also invests the other with a good deal of power that, if unleashed, could undermine the very foundations of culture». ⁸³⁵

Therefore, in Chapter 1 I attempted to link theories relating to the discourse on the grotesque, abjection and the Romantic (Burkian and Kantian) sublime with the historical-anthropological concept of liminality, and how this concept was later recovered by Michel Foucault with the notion of heterotopia, identifying heterotopia as a space of the margin created by normative society to circumscribe the monster outside the space of the normal and generate a place that identifies with the marginalised subject. Moreover, I used the reference to Angela Jones' essay on the notion of 'queer heterotopia' ⁸³⁶ because I wanted to highlight the importance of spaces of otherness as sites of resistance for non-normative subjectivities identified as monstrous.

In this regard, Mary Shelley constituted the starting point of a reflection on monstrosity and the spaces of otherness that I wanted to contextualise with both her socio-cultural background and the Gothic literary imagery of Romantic England. In Chapter 2, in fact, I tried to trace a continuity between the monster in *Frankenstein* (1818) as embodied otherness circumscribed to the spatialities of difference, and the monstrosity presented in *The Last Man* (1826), which becomes pandemic and exceeds the boundaries established between norm and margin. Thus, although in *Frankenstein* the Creature resides in the places of otherness, and from these places attempts to negotiate with the normative subject and acquire its own voice, the gap between the normative subjects and the abnormal subject is still distinct. This difference is evident in the DeLaceys' hut, occupied by the DeLaceys inside and by the Creature who lives hidden in the gap in the walls, which becomes a place of exile from the family unit for the

⁸³⁵ Ivi, p. 294.

⁸³⁶ Jones, Angela, "Queer heterotopias: Homonormativity and the future of queerness." *InterAlia: Pismo poświęcone studiom queer* 4, 2009.

monster. It is even more evident in the confrontation at the Chamounix glacier with his creator Victor Frankenstein, where the Creature takes voice for the first time against his Master, in a sublime place outside of conventionally normative spaces, and where anyhow he keeps his status as an artificial Creature and Victor that of normative Man.

This is how the margin becomes a place of resistance for the monster and of counter-narrative, and this is also evident in the title of the essay by transfeminist critic Susan Stryker⁸³⁷, who reiterates the importance for the monster to be able to speak at the Chamounix glacier, and who uses the figure of the creature as a metaphor for Otherness represented by non-cisgender and non-heteronormative identities. Another trans* author and activist, the Spanish philosopher Paul B. Preciado, used the metaphor of the monstrous creature during a famous conference in 2020 to reinforce the link between the cultural imaginary related to otherness and anti-normative identity, looking at the discourse of the monstrous from a sociological and psychoanalytical perspective, stating that «[l]e monstre est celui qui vit en transition. Celui dont le visage, le corps et les pratiques ne peuvent encore être considérés comme vrais dans un régime de savoir et de pouvoir déterminés.»⁸³⁸ Conversely, in *The Last Man* the destructive power of the Female Plague evades the binary boundaries of norm and difference, subverting the Eurocentric logic of Subject and Other, and unites all of humanity in the condition of monstrous disease, from Constantinople, considered as the place of absolute Eastern otherness, to London, the geographical symbol of norm and civilisation.

In Chapter 3, I wanted to analyse the relationship between monstrosity, feminist fabulations (Barr) and queer identity in Angela Carter's writing and the power relationship between woman as a hypersexualised monster and her Master, as it happens in the short story *The Loves of Lady Purple*, where it is shown a relationship between a woman-monster as executioner-victim, or in the

⁸³⁷ Stryker, Susan, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage*. New York University Press, 1996.

⁸³⁸ "the monster is the one who lives in transition. He whose face, body and practices cannot yet be considered as real in a regime of determined knowledge and power." [my translation] in Preciado, Paul B., *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle: rapport pour une académie de psychanalystes*. Bernard Grasset, 2020.

short story *The Lady of the House of Love (The Bloody Chamber, 1979)*, where the relationship takes place between the maiden-monstrous vampire to be saved (and to be feared) and the male saviour-prey who risks making the female figure to be saved a passive female figure, by subjecting her as a passive ideal to be looked after. At the same time, we could observe in *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) how the space of the desert and those who inhabit it contribute to the process of metamorphosis of the monster-woman as a hyperbolic ideal of beauty that is functional to the male imaginary, represented here by Evelyn-Eve. The physical movement of the picaresque journey from the European London, ideal of the Western world, of Eurocentric intellectualism and white misogyny that Evelyn embodies, to the exotic, guerrilla New York, to the American desert can be considered a journey from monolithic normative subjectivity to a total metamorphosis of identity that overcomes gender binarisms and deconstructs them beyond biological determinism. In the desert, a cancellation and reformulation occurs because Evelyn finds himself in a “blank sheet of paper”, or “*tabula erasa*”⁸³⁹, due to the liminal condition of those who inhabit such a space. At the same time, it has been possible to observe how Fevvers, the confident monster-woman and showgirl in *Nights at the Circus* (1984), similarly goes through a process of re-appropriation of her own monstrous image according to her own terms, evolving from *freak* figure objectified by the male eye that consumes her female body as a product of spectacle to Winged Woman aware of her own subversive power, transforming herself into the symbolic incarnation of the Victorian New Woman, which Carter uses in a parodic play.

Lastly, in Jeanette Winterson's works, the focus of Chapter 3, the monstrous queer from *The Passion* (1987) and *Sexing the Cherry* (1989) is analysed through the characters of Villanelle and the Dog-Woman, making them two figures who oscillate between the two worlds of the urban reality of the Napoleonic Venice and the 17th century London, moving from the centre to the margin. At the same time, through their first-person narration, they both observe the normative society and denounce its arbitrariness and the grotesqueness

⁸³⁹ Carter, Angela, *The passion of new Eve*, Virago Press, London, 2015., p. 79

hidden and normalised by power itself, which is presented as grotesque as well. Conversely, in *Frankissstein* (2019), the re-actualisation of Mary Shelley's original novel is aimed at reflecting on the persistence over time of the depiction of the monster as a figuration of the anti-anthropocentrism envisaged by Mary Shelley, and how this anti-anthropocentrism evolves in 21st century society, coming into contact with the discourse of transhumanism, the necessity of a corporeal materialism, of being mortal individuals and considering the dichotomy mind/body as a single organic process, therefore not dividing the two concepts of mind and body in order to give privilege to mind over body.

In conclusion, Mary Shelley, Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson are united by the common intention to see in the queer and feminine monster a figuration of difference that, from the spaces of the margin, aims to generate counter-narratives of resistance that have the power to subvert the dominant schemes and heteropatriarchal logic of the normal body. At the same time, acknowledging to be a queer monster means to accept to come from a reality based on binaries, especially gender binaries, and it means to accept one's own condition by transforming it into an embodied experience, aimed at transiting between the liminal spaces and those of the centre. Monstrosity preserves its own condition of alterity, with the aim of reassigning potentiality to the "hideous progeny" announced by Shelley, which has always represented the difference feared by Victor Frankenstein, a hideous progeny which escapes the objectifying, and therefore controllable, power of the Master's eye.

Hence, considering the factors that I have anticipated in the introduction, I have demonstrated, during the development of this thesis, how:

1. *Frankenstein* still constitutes a point of departure for Gothic and science fiction concerning the transformation of the discourse on the body across the centuries and the literary genres. It was possible to find the topics of monstrosity as a queer and feminist metaphor, the narrative pattern of bodily manipulation and the relationship between Creature and Creator in the literary legacy of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson, as it was possible to observe how Gothic fiction

has always been an ideal genre for the genesis of alternative figurations of identity, sexuality and gender that have contrasted the dominant Western ideology.

2. In Carter, the discourse on the body, its materiality, depiction and changeability moves from a critique of the patriarchal representation of the female body as a passive erotic object to a reconfiguration of the body image in order to assign to the 'female erotic monster' an identitary power and an authority, manifested through a (physical and symbolical) distancing from the spaces of the Norm, in order to acquire an autonomous voice in the spaces of Otherness.
3. It has been possible to observe a correlation between the isolation of the abject bodies and the landscapes in which they move in the three authors' works, just as I have shown that there is a connection between the promotion of a normative corporeality and the industrial and hyper-technological, urbanised spaces exalting and normalising it. Thus, anti-normative spaces and monstrous figurations are *anti-topoi* that are intersected with the space of legitimised power. In Carter, as in Winterson, the body is a tool to reflect the space and social dynamics in which subjects are incorporated, or from which monsters are ejected.

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