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MARY SHELLEY AND THE ORIGINS OF THE SCIENCE FICTION GENRE

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (Artigo)
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como requisito parcial à obtenção do título de
Licenciatura em Letras Inglês

Área de concentração: Literatura Inglesa

Orientador: Prof. Dr. Valécio Irineu Barros

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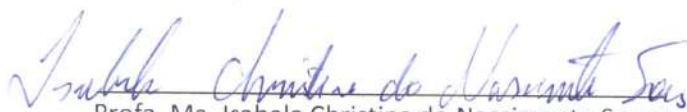
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RESUMO

Ha 200 anos uma jovem, filha de um influente filósofo e órfã de mãe, mudou para sempre a história da literatura e foi responsável por estabelecer um gênero que se perpetua até hoje como o mais consumido e procurado por seus leitores. Este artigo analisa os elementos que levaram à criação do romance *Frankenstein* de Mary Shelley e como essa obra contribuiu para o início da ficção científica. Neste sentido, ele se propõe a trazer questionamentos e respostas sobre a vida da autora e dos caminhos que a ficção científica tomou de sua origem até os dias atuais.

Palavras-chave: Gêneros literários. Ficção científica. Origens. Mary Shelley

ABSTRACT

200 years ago, a young lady, daughter of an influential philosopher and orphan of mother, changed the history of literature forever and was responsible for establishing a genre that continues to this day as the most consumed and sought after by its readers. This article discusses the elements that led to the creation of the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and how this work contributed to the beginning of the science fiction genre. Thus, it proposes to raise questions and give answers about the author's life and the paths that science fiction has taken from its origins till the present time.

Keywords: Literary Genre. Science Fiction. Origins. Mary Shelley.

1 INTRODUCTION

When we think of science fiction, what's the first idea that comes to mind? *Interstellar*? *Star Wars*? Or perhaps a future of machines taking over everything? Yes, you are correct. But first, it was the tale of a teenage girl who, one tedious day, decided to write a story about a doctor and his creature.

During my childhood and adolescence, I was introduced to a genre I knew only through films, and which presented ideas that went beyond reality and what our eyes could imagine. It was like that when I watched films like *Alien*, *The Mist*, and other similar titles. The idea of a world driven by an exacerbated technology seemed so surreal that it was hard to believe it at all. When I entered my English Letters Course, I was introduced to readings and theories that changed my way of seeing and made me rethink all the articles I had read and the movies I had watched before. It's funny how the years in undergraduation transform you and change your conception in the most different areas. In 2018, I was introduced to the work of Mary Shelley and at the time I was attracted to her texts, in which I perceived a mixture of feelings with a sad reality, so connected to our days. Hers was the story of a woman who was born in an age full of restrictions and silencing, within the English Empire, an age ruled by taboo and religion, which made me curious about all the obstacles she had to overcome, in order to leave her name marked in the history of Literature.

The questions left by Mary Shelley haunted me during my undergraduation course and caused many changes in my conceptions of society. Science Fiction offers a way to explore social and political issues in a safe and imaginary environment. This can be particularly appealing in times of uncertainty or change, when the real world seems too dangerous or confusing to navigate. Science fiction also allows us to escape the mundane realities of our everyday lives into a world of adventure and possibility. In these stories, we can imagine

ourselves as brave heroes or intrepid explorers, discovering new worlds and encountering strange and exotic creatures. We can also vicariously experience the thrill of danger and adventure without actually putting ourselves at risk. Finally, science fiction often features intriguing concepts and ideas that make us think about the world in new ways. These stories can challenge our assumptions about reality and help us see the world from a different perspective. They can also provide a much-needed dose of optimism in a sometimes bleak and depressing world. These are just some of the reasons why science fiction is so attractive to us. It is an exciting, yet intense, genre full of possibilities.

2 METHODOLOGY

In writing this article, I opted for a bibliographic and qualitative research. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2006), qualitative research involves an interpretive approach to the world, which means that researchers study things in their natural settings, trying to understand phenomena in terms of the meanings people give to them. In the case of this article, the aim was to answer the following guiding questions: 1) How Mary Shelley's background enabled the creation of *Frankenstein*? and 2) How and to what extent this novel contributed to the creation of a new literary genre: sci-fi.

3 MODERN PROMETHEUS: REFLECTIONS OF MARY SHELLEY'S LIFE IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

In a gloomy November night, Dr. Victor Frankenstein's Creature took its first breath of life. In a strange body, nameless even before birth, the being experienced the first sensations of humanity. Faced with distorted otherness, its creator could only offer rejection, before fleeing in horror from what he had created.

The author of the novel *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (Mary Shelley, after her marriage to the Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley), was born in London, on 30 August 1797, days before losing her mother to complications in childbirth. Later, in experiencing her first motherhood, her daughter also died shortly after birth. This tragedy was soon followed by the suicide of her half-sister, Fanny Imlay. Thus, one might say that both the author and her Creature were born from pain and loss.

It is noticeable how Mary Shelley brought aspects of her life to her innovative novel, especially when we consider the feelings experienced by the Creature, such as loneliness, the search for self-knowledge, rejection and abandonment, as well as the pain of losing a loved one, a feeling present both in the life of the "monster" as well as in that of the author. Another interesting aspect of the novel is the way it explores the formation of identity through human relationships and interactions and how the monstrosity of people themselves affects the construction of character. After bringing the being to life, Dr. Frankenstein threw him into darkness, into silence, into the dangerous mystery that permeates the Other, the one who is different from us. And for the Creature, there was only the vain insistence on adapting to a world, in which his body and appearance were taken into account quite before any other element of his personality. In short, a struggle for acceptance. With the success of her work, which was full of elements that brought human nature into focus, Mary Shelley managed to get her book published and with its acclaim, a milestone emerged in a society that still maintained a set of restrictions on female writers.

4 MARY SHELLEY AS WRITER: PERSONAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS

If you have studied Mary Shelley's work, you can see that there is something very dark in her words. Undoubtedly, from her birth until the end of her life, which was full of mysteries and tragedies, she went through a set of experiences that were paramount to the composition of her

masterpiece and consequently to establishing her legacy. Mary Shelley was born into an intellectual house: her father, William Godwin, was a philosopher and her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was an educator, proto-feminist writer and thinker.

With only 10 days of her birth, her mother died of puerperal fever, and her father became her tutor. Unlike most women born in the 19th century, Mary Shelley received incentives from her father to seek culture and take her first steps in writing, a process which came about in a curious way: “*as her mother forename was the same as hers, when she visited her grave, she used to trace the letters on her mother's tombstone several times with her fingers*” (GEARINI, 2020). Thus, she began learning how to write. In 1814 she met Percy Bysshe Shelley, who would be her lover until the year 1816 “*when Percy's [first] wife was mysteriously found dead with a never confirmed suspicion of suicide,*” (GEARINI, 2020), and the romantic poet finally married Mary Shelley. For two years they lived as teenagers in love, until the death of their first daughter, Clara, who was only a few months old. Between fights and betrayals, they met the famous poet Lord Byron, who one day invited the couple and other friends to spend holidays at his mansion. In a rainy night, the host suggested that each of his guests should write a horror story, and the best narrative would win the storytelling contest he proposed. Mary, tired of betrayals and saddened by the loss of her newborn daughter, wrote the novel *Frankenstein*, inspired by a nightmare she had in the early hours of July 15, 1815 in which she saw her daughter return as an undead and also her mother, for whose death Mary Shelley blamed herself, a sense of guilt further compounded by having sex with her then-to-be husband, Percy Shelley, while he was still married to another woman. The publication of her work was prohibited by all publishers because women did not have their space among intellectuals and, due to her age, she was then only 18 years old. Thus, Percy added a preface to Mary Shelley's novel, publishing it in the name of his beloved. In the next pages, we will understand the social context of women in England in the 19th century. Even in a period of great innovations with Romanticism, women writers continued their struggles for recognition

4.1 Mary Shelley, Her Legacy and the Challenges in the Following Eras

During the Georgian Era (1714-1830), London consolidated its position as the world's financial center. The city expanded with the construction of buildings, streets and avenues and the creation of parks and gardens. In the port, the large quays teemed with national and foreign vessels, bringing products and goods from different parts of the globe. The city had become a metropolis, with more than 700,000 inhabitants. In the next paragraph we will see a little about the Victorian Era and the differences between the two periods in which Shelley's novel was created.

The Victorian Era, from (1837 to 1901), marks the reign of Queen Victoria in the United Kingdom and a period of great economic, political and cultural transformations. Also known as the Victorian period, this era is characterized by the consolidation of English supremacy on the seas, the conquest of colonies in Africa and Asia, the increase of industries and the stimulation of the arts. During the Victorian Era, the United Kingdom expanded its colonies into Africa and India, as well as the Middle East and parts of Asia. Thus, England became the most powerful nation in the world and called itself the British Empire. At the head

of the kingdom were Queen Victoria (1819-1901) and her husband, Prince Albert (1819-1861). Both embodied the model of exemplary parents, devout Christians and impartial rulers in political matters.

Returning to the Georgian Era, literature is marked by the rise of writers such as: Oscar Wilde, George Eliot, Charles Dickens and the sisters Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë and Mary Shelley, who were recognized as one of the precursors of a new genre of literature: science fiction. The literature of the time is divided between novels that portray the tastes and habits of the bourgeoisie and novels whose authors are dedicated to science fiction. One of the writers who captured the contradictions of nineteenth-century English society was the novelist Charles Dickens (1812-1870), who in the opening lines of his novel *A Tale of Two Cities* (2008). Summarizes those years:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way--in short, the period was so far like the present period that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only. (DICKENS, 2008 n.p)

The aforementioned context was that of a very remarkable period, not only in terms of power, but also of social affirmation. In simple terms, we can establish through historical data that the Georgian Era was technologically more backward but certainly more liberal in the aspects that refer to the individual, aspects that in the Victorian Era became the opposite, i.e., the technological advances were fully propelled by the conquest of the Industrial Revolution and the expansion of the British Empire, but in terms of individual life, it was a period marked by strict social rules and taboos.

4.2 The Vision of Women and Their Role in 19th-Century English Society

The difficulties faced by women throughout history are well known. From a time when they were seen as mere sexual objects meant for reproduction purposes only, women have been fighting a long battle for the deserved recognition of their contribution to the building of civilization at large and of modern society in particular.

Even the revolutions that took place in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries were not enough to change the prospects of women, who continued to be reduced to subservience and limited to the domestic sphere, in a society in which intellectuality was understood as an exclusive attribute of men, women were often excluded and had little or no space for their voices and publications.

Prejudice against women was widespread and even instilled by some philosophers, restricting women's access to public places and spaces in society. The woman who tried to use her intelligence for other purposes was seen as violating the "natural" order of things and religion. In a society that began to evolve in relation to the changes that are evident today in the process of producing gender equality, Mary Shelley and also her mother Mary Wollstonecraft and other novelists were already fighting for ideas that shaped a new world by reinforcing previously broken links and giving a long time excluded part of society, a chance to have a voice and a role in building a better future for the next generations.

4.3 Women's Writing in the 19th Century

As a result of this adverse context, the transition from the figure of women readers of novels to women writers of novels was not immediate and, when it happened, it was intrinsically related to the very organization of society.

The English critic Raymond Williams (2014) states that, as much as literature often seeks to constitute itself as an autonomous work of art, in which the form of language and internal verisimilitude would have more importance than the referents of creation, it is undeniable — and inevitable — that the literary text refers to a specific context, receiving influence from its time and means of creation. In other words, from its social and historical context.

In fact, the literature of the 19th century was marked by imagination (Romanticism) but also by the bringing real social elements into art (Victorian period), often with a critical view of reality. Following the same reasoning about the creation process and the final product, we arrive, therefore, at the type of writing possible for nineteenth-century authors. In this sense, the study of the work of Mary Shelley and Jane Austen, English authors of the Romantic period, but who faced all the difficulties of being women writers in a society whose assumption was precisely the denial of this activity to someone of the female sex, goes far beyond the simple reading of their novels. In the case of Mary Shelley, understanding the conditions of her writing, her themes and her style involves understanding the social conditions of her time, her context of emergence (in late Georgian and early Victorian England) and the position of women in this supposedly rationally organized society. In short, the study of any author's work is inextricably linked to the social production of his/her writing.

5 *FRANKENSTEIN* AS THE SEED OF A NEW GENRE: SCIENCE FICTION

According to Porto (2019), sci-fi “extrapolates the supernatural style characteristic of the Gothic novel to refer to the natural knowledge of scientific invention, originating from science and technique without abdicating from terror and of the fantastic.” Considering this, *Frankenstein* may be seen as seminal work for science fiction.

Who would have thought that from a vacation journey would emerge a literary work that would give the right foot entry into a genre that questioned science, religion and everything that contradicted the freedom of human beings, from the criticism of the emergence of the first man to the most basic instincts, the primitive and sinister aspects contained in this rational being known as Man? When reading the novel *Frankenstein, or the modern Prometheus*, we can identify several moments in which Mary Shelley criticizes those who had the power, as for example, in this passage: “*Was man, indeed, at once so powerful, so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base? He appeared at one time a mere scion of the evil principle and at another as all that can be conceived of noble and godlike.*” (SHELLEY, 1882 p. 135)

Another aspect Shelley criticizes is human egocentrism. This is shown in the moment of the “birth” of the creature, when Dr. Victor Frankenstein breaks all natural laws in his boundless search for knowledge and power, once he desecrates the dead and uses their parts to animate a being by using what he calls the “spark” of life. Let’s consider the following excerpt: “*After days and nights of incredible labor and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter.*” (SHELLEY, [1882],p.59). In addition to a criticism of human egocentrism, the passage quoted above try to personify man as a new “god” with the power to change what is biological and “immutable”. In the novel we can perceive relevant changes in the characters from the creation scene on, when Dr. Frankenstein conceives the creature and especially when the

monster begins to copy aspects of the human relationship. The author managed to express, between the lines, changes that happen during life and, in doing so, managed to carry out the transition from an old to a new genre.

5.1 Frankenstein and the Paradox of Humans' Darkest Desires

Analyzing Shelley's work, we can perceive the relationship she establishes, through the character of Dr. Victor Frankenstein, with the human quest for self-assertion, power and divinity. Right at the beginning of the novel, we are faced with the desecration of the dead by the scientist, in order to give life to his "monster," an act which shows a total transgression of moral limits as well as an abominable search for the power which, until then, was an exclusive attribute of God, as shown in the Bible:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So, God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; (Genesis chapter 1:26-27)

Now, in aspiring to godhead by trying to alter the fate which was destined for everyone, namely, death, Victor Frankenstein reveals his arrogance, when he declares:

Did anyone indeed exist, except I, the creator, who would believe, unless his senses convinced him, in the existence of the living monument of presumption and rash ignorance which I had let loose upon the world (SHELLEY, [1882] p. 78)

In fact, when he refers to the creature as a "living monument of presumption and rash ignorance," Victor recognizes that his actions were driven by impulse and a lack of foresight, and by adding the phrase "let loose upon the world", he acknowledges the potential harm his creature is prone cause.

Another relationship we can notice, when analyzing the novel, is the one between the scientist and the creature as if they were two countries at war, a conflict in which the holder of the greatest power always abandons the most fragile to its own fate. Dr. Victor wanted the power of a God capable of giving life to dead matter, but acquiring such power his human nature was compromised, transforming his greatest discovery into his greatest nightmare, once he sought to break the laws of life and ascend to what would be "forbidden" to mortals

The monster in the story wants answers from its creator's mouth, so it goes in search of them until it finds them. The creature not only wants answers, it wants relationships, it wants to engage with the people around it, it wants explanations about its existence and its purpose in life, rather than being homeless or something alive but without purpose. During the reading of the novel, we can understand that man has the ability to go beyond limits, but because he doesn't know himself, we often get lost and lose track of our surroundings and that was Dr. Frankenstein's sin: not knowing himself and his limits.

Frankenstein's monster, newly created in the laboratory, went from the instinctual state to the state of a thinking being, when he began to observe the world and formulate his own thoughts, acquire knowledge and wonder who it was, where it came from and who had created it. In moments like these, the Creature asks itself:

[...] And what was I? I knew nothing about my upbringing and my creator, but I knew I didn't have the slightest bit of what they called money, or friends, or the most insignificant property. In addition, I was endowed with a hideous and repellent physique. I was not even of the same nature as man [...] (SHELLEY, 1882, p.26)

It is expected that an almost human creature would want to know its origin. On one occasion, while taking refuge in an abandoned hut, the monster learned to read and speak and tried to copy the formation of a family like that of Dr. Frankenstein when, at a certain point in the novel, he found the scientist's diary that contained the processes that led to the its creation and only

then realized the aberration it was, which triggered several questions. From this moment on, the creature goes in search of its creator in order to obtain answers to the reason for its creation and its subsequent abandonment. This journey of the creature produces in the reader the desire that the author seeks to convey about the origin of the monster. In fact, the novel gets to its end bringing questions and answers sometimes unforeseen, but always seeking to captivate its readers more and more, ending this adventure in a fantastic way. In following topic we will depart from Shelley's universe and embark on the contemporary trends of the genre she helped to start.

6 NEW TRENDS IN SCIENCE FICTION FOR THE COMING DECADES

The second decade of the 2000s brought with it a series of new trends in society and the arts, and with the literary genres it would not be different. With multiculturalism getting closer to people, with the advancement of technologies that allowed a complete immersion into new cultures, the new themes dealt with in Sci-Fi became increasingly popular among readers. In this topic, we present a non-exhaustive list of some of the most prominent of these trends.

AFROFUTURISM: Afrofuturism is a cultural movement centered on exploring themes that impact the African diaspora, typically through a scientific or technological context. It is a style that transcends fantasy and science fiction – in fact, it even transcends literature, touching areas such as cinema or music, but it has gained an increasingly relevant prominence within these genres. Exponents such as Octavia E. Butler or Samuel R. Delany, a new generation of talents has dedicated itself to imagining realities quite different from those imposed by traditional fantasy, so often inspired (and limited) by ethnocentric Western worldviews.

ECOFICTION: Is a literary subgenre dedicated to the exploration of environmental themes (real or not) through fictional narratives. Typically associated with science fiction, it often serves to draw attention to the negative impact that certain human actions have had or may have on nature. With climate change increasingly on the agenda, it is natural that many authors turn to these themes in their work, making us aware of post-apocalyptic futures where the planet and its survivors struggle with the effects of devastating catastrophes and environmental issues, including war and disease. Two of this subgenre's leading authors are Diane Cook and Jeff VanderMeer.

BIZARRE: The bizarre has long left its mark on speculative fiction, swirling unrestrictedly between fantasy, science fiction and horror. The novelty is that it has gradually ceased to be a niche genre to reach an ever-widening audience. Once an exclusive style of the independent scene, dominated by authors such as Carlton Mellick III, Kevin L. Donihe, Cody Goodfellow and Cameron Pierce, the bizarre has been diluted and taken its absurdism to the "mainstream", to the point of conquering (or at least be nominated for) literary prizes that until recently seemed remote to it. In the past, we would be unlikely to see a labyrinthine fantasy like *Piranesi* win the Women's Prize for Fiction. Or a collection of testimonies by androids aboard a ship, like *The Officials*, in the finalists of the International Booker Prize. But the world has been increasingly embracing its "strange" and experimental side. Overall, the bizarre focus on aspects such as the unconventional, the strange, and the nonsensical, often pushing the boundaries of storytelling. In short, the bizarre invites readers to engage with the absurdities and complexities of life.

7 FINAL REMARKS

Through the tragic story of Dr. Viktor Frankenstein, Mary Shelley questioned the divinity because the spark of life belonged only to the Superior Being and not to humans, the desecration of the dead was a theme highlighted by the author certainly due to the family losses she experienced and which were already reported in this article. When the scientist seeks only

the best parts raises questions like: Are we just what we produce? Are some just your senior members? others are just a pretty face and in the end are we just poor meat? As it has been shown, through the invention of her Creature, Mary Shelley wanted to express the desire to give life to what was inanimate, after so much pain for her losses as a mother. She just wanted to question the power of giving life to or taking it from those she had lost... you do not you can tell but the monster was a bit of the author... let's remember that the monster wanted a family like Dr. and that's why I spied trying to understand how that composition worked. Shelley brings her readers a pain that comes from the beginning of human civilization, which is the loss of their beloved ones. Even though she was the daughter of a profound connoisseur of the human sciences, Mary Shelley put on the pages of her work all the pains and questions that human beings ask every day about their existence and, due to her contribution, her name is present, along with other classic authors, in the literary canon of all time

In concluding an article that discusses the contribution of an author who not only built a work but set a milestone in literature is gratifying, especially when one realizes the impact of this author's biography on her work and the way she questioned a society that was full of cultural novelties, but at the same time so restrictive to certain audiences. It was possible to demonstrate that Mary Shelley was an audible and remarkable voice within this restrictive society, and helped to pave the way for future female voices. It was also possible to understand the cultural and social changes that the fiction genre has gone through and the trends it has been following. Producing articles of this nature requires research and various sources and recent knowledge aimed at a greater understanding of the expansion of the genre and its ramifications. Finally, the same desire which Mary Shelley tried to fulfill with his creation, namely: "Give life to the unnamed and give wings to imagination" is a spark that still may ignite the next generations of authors, a generation that can take us further through new galaxies and adventures, always seeking to answer the questions about the aim and reason for our existence as human beings.

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