

# *inerba* primi passi nei testi

*Undergraduate Research Journal*

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FONTE: *Inerba* n. 5, 2024-2025 (marzo 2025), p. 111-117

URL: <<https://inerba.fileli.unipi.it/articoli/the-privilege-of-dying-pierpaolo-toso/>>

# The Privilege of Dying

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the traits of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's idiolect, focusing on the influence exerted by the sociopolitical background of her period. By virtue of the core topic of immortality functioning as a narrative thread between *Frankenstein* and *The Mortal Immortal*, this analysis will lead to the identification of an intricate system of symbols and epistemological beliefs.

PAROLE-CHIAVE: Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, Immortality, Alchemy, Science fiction, Death .

Questo articolo è stato realizzato sotto la supervisione della prof.ssa Simona Beccone, docente di Letteratura inglese.

## About the life of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and the birth of *Frankenstein* (1816)

To understand the circumstances that shaped the character of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley as a writer, it is indispensable to focus on some major aspects of her life. The experience of transience that she experienced can be dated back to her early childhood, when a series of unfortunate events started to unfold.

The English novelist was born in London on the 30<sup>th</sup> of August 1797, daughter of illustrious parents who were eminent figures of their generation. Her mother – Mary Wollstonecraft – made a name of herself as a feminist advocate, widely remembered for the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), one of the trailblazing works on the paramount importance of female education. On the other hand, her father William Godwin was a political philosopher and a novelist, renowned for his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice and its Influence on Morals and Happiness* (1791) where he elucidated the principles of a radical anarchic vision of humanity.

Soon after her birth, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley lost her mother due to puerperal fever, and she was left to the care of her father until he remarried in 1801 to Mary Jane Clairmont. Despite the lack of support coming from her stepmother – who was not her equal in terms of intellectual stature – Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was still able to foster her literary curiosity thanks to her father who allowed her to peruse their extensive library. As a consequence of this, she started experimenting with creative writing from a very young age and in 1808 she was encouraged to publish her first poem *Mounseer Nongtongpaw* in a booklet<sup>1</sup>.

By 1812, after being at loggerheads with her stepmother for quite some time, Mary was sent to Scotland where she would stay with an acquaintance – William Baxter – to further her education. The novelist would later describe those years as a time of utter freedom for her imagination, in a place where nature was perceived as so sublime as to give an unprecedented boost to her creativity.

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<sup>1</sup> Even though Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's poetry is a constant in her literary life, it is often taken in minor consideration because her lyrical verses were either published anonymously or simply kept in a manuscript form.

Upon her return to London, Mary was introduced to her father's new disciple: Percy Bysshe Shelley. A wealthy young man who had studied in Oxford and was now starting to shape his beliefs in a socialist future. Percy was instantly attracted by Mary's bright mind and appearance, even though he was already married to another woman, named Harriet Westbrook, with whom he already shared a daughter. Although William Godwin put his foot down trying to stop Mary from getting involved in such a situation, she eventually reciprocated Percy's feelings and fled with him to Europe in 1814.

The couple started roaming around Europe, primarily led by Percy's erratic personality, which in time also displayed a tendency of establishing multiple sentimental relationships at once. Even though Percy encouraged Mary to keep writing, he was more focused on his own literary ascension, sometimes failing to pay attention to her works. By February 1815 they had relocated to London where Mary bore their first daughter, who regrettably died two weeks later. The process of grieving took a great toll on both her mind and body, and this combined with Percy's deteriorating health – his body didn't tolerate damp climates well – made it necessary for the couple to move southbound to Europe once again.

In June of the same year the couple settled in Switzerland, next to Lake Geneva where Lord Byron was renting a villa. The three of them, along with Byron's personal physician Dr. John Polidori, spent the entire summer socialising. During one of their encounters, an unforgiving storm forced the group to stay indoors, where they entertained themselves with tales of ghosts. Dared to construct a similar story for the sake of amusement, Mary found herself pondering about a potential topic: no sooner had she given up a rational approach to the creative process than she fell into a trance. All she could envision in that state of altered consciousness was a figure standing next to a reanimated corpse. That was the birth of *Frankenstein* (1816).

## Literary style and recurring themes

With the attempt to stay true to the complexity of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's style, the appropriate terms to describe her writings would be “an alchemical concoction”. In fact, multiple literary devices are measured out meticulously to elicit specific responses from the readers.

Both *Frankenstein* and *The Mortal Immortal* (1833) – examined throughout this essay – share an epistolary narrative, in which stories are recounted by means of letters and diaries. Such a narration forces the reader to adopt the perspective of a given character because of the total correspondence that occurs between said character and the narrator in those instances. Consequently, the readers are made aware of the limited point of view that is put under their scrutiny, ultimately calling for their hermeneutical abilities to establish whether a character could be considered a reliable/unreliable narrator. In Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's case, the epistolary choice also allows for the creation of a peculiar atmosphere of uncertainty, which is particularly suitable to convey a feeling of foreboding suspense, a typical feature of gothic novels<sup>2</sup>.

Another fundamental aspect that contributes to the fragmentation of characters' perspectives in her literature is the elaborate framed narrative found in *Frankenstein*. Generally described as “a story within a story”, it is developed by embedding a tale of others through a character's own voice, and it is visually well rendered with the image of a Russian matryoshka doll. By juxtaposing three different tellers – Walton, Victor and the Creature –

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that for the purpose of this research, it will not be possible to delve into the science fiction characteristics which are nonetheless essential to represent Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's production thoroughly.

the author is able to cast doubts on the readers' mind, laying the basis for a critical interpretation of what is being told by whom. It's a tool that raises questions about the characters' true intentions. This framed structure aims at a bigger truth, which is only hinted at but never truly disclosed. The choral novel generates a redundant echo that leads the reader to a series of expectations, known as the "hermeneutic code" (Clark 2014: 253-254).

As for the idiolect itself, the register is usually quite elevated, and it reflects the sophisticated mind of the characters. But the intensity that is being channelled through their formal words does not speak only about their actions and ambitions, it is also key to understanding the psychological aspects behind their behaviour. There are distinct semantic fields scattered across *Frankenstein* and *The Mortal Immortal* which crystallize the emotions that the characters are experiencing.

Plotwise it is possible to identify a significant common denominator intertwining the two literary pieces: the desire to tackle the topic of human mortality through the lens of scientific progress. Undoubtedly, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's personal story – a life drenched in pain because of the many losses that she suffered, starting from her mother – partially explains her fascination with the subject. However, it doesn't overtly clarify the interest in the relationship between alchemy and science, which should probably be perceived more as a continuum than a dichotomy (Ketterer 1994: 61). As a matter of fact, the fusion of the supernatural with science is a distinctive trait of science fiction, and the events at Villa Diodati urged Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley to write about supernatural occurrences through the aid of speculative pseudoscience.

It could be also argued that, if on the surface, some lexical items seem to be pointing at a religious background, the Shelley's were deeply convinced that the world was purely guided by natural laws. For instance, when the author opts to include the archaic spelling of the word "demon" – *daemon* – it is worth underlining how that alternative spelling in the world of natural magic is ingeniously pointing at a benign spirit rather than at the Devil of Christianity (Ketterer 1994: 69).

## *The Mortal Immortal* (1834)

An anthology designed to attract the female youth, *The Keepsake* was a literary annual which featured high quality illustrations often accompanied by a diverse array of literary pieces: poems, essays and short fiction. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley was tasked to write a short story in 1833 about the scene depicted in a particular engraved artwork, showing an attractive young lady – called Bertha – coming down a set of stairs (Cope 2014: 122).

Given the intrinsic market value that the annual was supposed to generate, many authors were reluctant at the idea of contributing to an anthology that was mainly associated to its commercial appeal, supposedly disregarding the quality of the literature contained within. Nevertheless, it seems very likely that upon writing *The Mortal Immortal*, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley took the chance to embed an elusive social criticism in her story. In fact, despite the plainly visible editor's desire of eliciting a standard of perpetual beauty and perfection to its audience, the English author shaped her character Bertha by taking a stance against the reliance on sole physical appearance (Marino 2015: 29).

Of no less importance is the author's cosmology surfacing from the deeper levels of the short story, a full body of beliefs that can only be partially explained by considering Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's eventful life. Thrown into a world of death and hardships, she might have resorted to the fabrication of a fictional dimension, where she could freely explore the consequences of immortality, letting her unconscious speak for herself. It is noteworthy to highlight that, in spite of her legitimate yearning for a fictitious happy ending, the unbending faith in natural order always prevented her from equating an earthly eternal life with a beguiling utopia.

The intricate network of sub meanings that are wisely concealed in *The Mortal Immortal* sheds some light over the impressive versatility of the English author and her literary sensibility as well, capable of encompassing different fields and styles. In the beginning of the short story, for example, she briefly presents a humoristic stance through the voice of the main character. The inclusion of some light-hearted jokes could be easily misinterpreted as an attempt to entertain the casual audience, whose approach to a work of science fiction usually implies a certain degree of levity. In truth, what the author is trying to accomplish is using irony as a linguistic technique to lay the foundations of her moral philosophy, whose standpoint on the issue of mortality can be summarized as: the will to obtain a seemingly never-ending existence is an ambition to be laughed at.

## Literary analysis

In the first few paragraphs of the short story, the main character sets the tone for the narration by openly engaging with the reader. This is made evident by the combination of the expressive and conative functions which are manifested through the voice of the protagonist. The opening sentence reveals the first-person narrative: «This is a memorable anniversary for *me*; on it *I* complete *my* three hundred and twenty-third year!» (Wollstonecraft Shelley 1834). The reader is then urged to place their trust in the narrator's honesty, and this is further enhanced by including metanarrative elements: «*I will tell my story, and my reader shall judge for me*». The use of these language functions helps thinning the line between fiction and reality.

The trajectory of the whole plot is wittily alluded to earlier in the short story, when the protagonist references *The Wandering Jew* and *Seven sleepers* – two Christian myths – along with *The History of Nourjahad*, a novel by Frances Sheridan. These examples of intertextuality serve several purposes: on one hand they all point to the theme of immortality, which is developed in said stories from different angles; on the other hand, they can be seen as a tool to gauge the extension of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's semiosphere, attempting to establish what kind of literary context influenced the birth of *The Mortal Immortal*.

As far as onomastics is concerned, it is worth delving into some details regarding the characters' speaking names. The origin of "Winzy" can be traced back to the Scottish word "winze", which is connected to the idea of "curse/imprecation" (Cope 2014:122). The meaning itself acts as metaphor for the protagonist's story arc. As with "Bertha" – derived from "Perchta", an Alpine goddess who embodies an internal dichotomy: she is either described as a benevolent figure dressed in white or as a ruthless witch with a violent disposition – the name represents the duality of her personality throughout the plot progression (Linchong 2024)<sup>3</sup>.

Indicative of the leitmotif that will accompany Winzy on his journey to test his immortality are also the numbers uttered by the protagonist in the beginning of the story. At first, he commemorates his birthday by saying that he has reached the age of 323, whose single digits in numerology refer to the relationship between God and mankind. Shortly after remarking on his anniversary, he reiterates his age by stating that he has been questioning his immortality for 303 years. The number denotes emptiness and new beginnings, which are both symbolic of his psychological chronotope. Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley might have inserted mismatched numbers to achieve polar opposite effects: the reader may judge the protagonist unworthy of their trust, making him a *de facto* unreliable narrator; or the reader detects in Winzy's fuzzy memory a further proof of his prolonged life, thus strengthening the core narrative.

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<sup>3</sup> Plotwise, the character of Bertha inherits the archetypal function of Pandora's box. In fact, upon engaging with her character for the first time, Winzy inadvertently triggers a chain of repercussions which will ultimately lead to him being cursed.

Instrumental in producing a reflection on the human condition is the addition of a supernatural element, that of alchemy. Although it may be seen as only an intriguing proto-scientific background to entice the reader, in the case of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley it operates as a real antithesis to natural order. In fact, her mastery of the terminology related to the mystical art creates an underlying isotopy which clearly exhibits her stance about technology: in a historical period marked by the rapidity and expansion of scientific progress, the English writer was both fascinated and perplexed about the future.

## Comparative study of *The Mortal Immortal* and *Frankenstein*

Although the distance separating the two literary pieces is of fifteen years, the red thread connecting the trademarks of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's writing is unquestionably discernible. The implication drawn from analysing the overlapping elements of fiction conveys one and the same message: challenging nature is a perilous path on which humanity should not dare to tread on.

The similarities found in the pair Victor Frankenstein/Cornelius Agrippa represent the typical Faustian trait of unethical thirst for knowledge. In particular, the domination over the cycle of life and death becomes an obsessive, intrusive thought whose consequences are ill-fated. This is the manifestation of the dystopic promethean mythologeme, where progress only brings about calamities. Suffering the outcomes of the “mad scientists' experiments” is another pair of characters – that of the Creature and Winzy – who also share a similar fate: they are both gifted with a seemingly unending existence, without consenting to it. These immortal beings will indeed outlive their creators but only to find loneliness and isolation, which is the only possible destiny for whoever orbits outside the natural order. Seeing as how their lives end up amounting to nothing more than mere surviving, the only available escape strategy is to embark on a suicidal journey.

The thematic of travel as an expedition is particularly relevant because it draws a parallel between the characters of Winzy and Walton. It could be argued that they are both the incarnation of a precise psychologeme: ambition. Contrary to what happens in the mind of the Creature, in fact, if Winzy doesn't succeed in taking his own life, he plans – just like Walton – to explore the icy grounds of the Northwest Passage. The two adventurers thus share a philanthropic goal, which is to revitalize society by expanding the human knowledge over those harsh routes and environments.

In this peculiar case, the setting plays a pivotal role because it condenses all laws of nature in one symbolic representation. More specifically, the element of ice is imbued with the properties of eternity, becoming an expression of the natural cycle itself. A place where the concepts of “ending” and “beginning” fuse together to personify the endless flowing of time, moving beyond the juxtaposition between good and evil.

It is due to the countless deeper layers on which the superficial plots are constructed that the essence of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's ideology can be observed. It could be said that her position towards the paradigm of life is to accept the phenomenon with its intrinsic contradictions. *The Mortal Immortal* and *Frankenstein* function as a reminder of the finiteness of mankind, and the need to acknowledge that the existential debate on the meaning of creation might never reach a plausible conclusion.

## Conclusion

As it has been demonstrated, the genesis of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's authorial voice can be found in the concomitance of different factors. The scientific advancements of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century laid the basis for the development of an imaginative hope which could fictionally counter the difficulties of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley's life. Nonetheless, her unwavering inclination towards the acceptance of the natural cycle never fails to stand out in her literary pieces. In fact, one could infer that there is no such thing as the exertion of control over the world of the living, and by quoting the English author's own words: «[...] the more I live, the more I dread death, even while I abhor life. Such an enigma is man—born to perish— [...]» (Wollstonecraft Shelley 1834).

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