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Exploring Nature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*

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The work presented in this MA thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original and my own work, except as acknowledged in the text. The work in this thesis has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

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## Abstract

The romantic period has been often characterized by its particular use of Nature in literature. This dissertation explores how Nature was employed as a multifunctional rhetorical device to express a variety of ideas and thoughts. To illustrate this, an analysis of the use of Nature in two of Mary Shelley's acclaimed novels, *Frankenstein* (1818,1831) and *The Last Man* (1826), is carried out. The use of the most prominent natural elements found in the two novels reveal that Nature actually possesses a rhetorical functionality in the shaping of meaning and ideas relevant to the author's narrative purposes. At the same time, some variations between the novels are observable that show an evolution not only of the Gothic tradition but also of key tenets from gender and ecocritical perspectives.

Keywords: Nature; Mary Shelley; *Frankenstein*; *The Last Man*; Romanticism.

## Resumen

El periodo romántico ha estado normalmente caracterizado por un uso peculiar de la Naturaleza. Este trabajo tiene el objetivo de explicar que la Naturaleza se usaba como un recurso retórico multifuncional para expresar una gran variedad de ideas y pensamientos. Para demostrar esto, se presenta un análisis del uso de la Naturaleza en dos aclamadas novelas de Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831) y *El último hombre* (1826). Los elementos naturales más prominentes encontrados en ambas novelas nos revelan que la Naturaleza sí que posee una funcionalidad retórica en la conformación de significados dentro del entramado narrativo. También indican que son significativas las variaciones entre ambas novelas no sólo en términos de la evolución de los aspectos de la tradición gótica, sino también desde perspectivas tanto de géneros como relativas a la ecocrítica.

Palabras clave: Naturaleza; Mary Shelley; *Frankenstein*; *El último hombre*, Romanticismo.

*Nature always wears the colors of the spirit.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson.

## Acknowledgements

To my two stars (E and M) for showing me the light.

## Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1. NATURE AND THE ROMANTIC TRADITION	3
1.1. The Sublime	3
1.2. Nature as a Restorative Agent	5
1.3. Nature as a Superior Entity	5
1.4. Romanticism and Ecocriticism	6
2. NATURE IN <i>FRANKENSTEIN</i>	9
2.1. The Main Natural Elements in <i>Frankenstein</i>	9
2.1.1. <i>Storms</i>	9
2.1.2. <i>Rivers and Lakes</i>	10
2.1.3. <i>Mountains</i>	11
2.1.4. <i>The Arctic</i>	12
2.2. The Sublime in <i>Frankenstein</i>	14
2.3. Nature as a Restorative Agent in <i>Frankenstein</i>	17
2.3.1. <i>Victor Frankenstein</i>	17
2.3.2. <i>The Creature</i>	19
2.4. Ecocriticism and <i>Frankenstein</i>	20
2.4.1. <i>The Human and The Non-Human</i>	20
2.4.2. <i>The Use of Science</i>	21
3. NATURE IN <i>THE LAST MAN</i>	23
3.1. The Sublime	23
3.2. Icy Landscape	26
3.3. The Plague and Ecocriticism	28
3.4. Internal Landscape	30
3.5. The Feminist Use of Nature	32
Conclusion	34
Works Cited	39

## INTRODUCTION

This dissertation deals with how Nature was employed in two novels by the Romantic writer Mary Shelley, her most popular and acclaimed novel, *Frankenstein* (1818) and her apocalyptic and lesser known narrative *The Last Man* (1826). The chief goal of this study is, first, to prove M. Shelley's awareness of the diverse functions that Nature might have in literary terms and, second, to carry out a comparative analysis of both works since my hypothesis is that Mary Shelley utilized Nature in different manners and for dissimilar purposes as she was perfectly aware of the fact that Nature can work as a rhetorical multifunctional device. To demonstrate this, this dissertation takes into account both the internal and external influences that may have affected the different representations of Nature in the two novels and the lapse of time in their respective compositions that may have given way to adjustments and evolutions in the use of Nature as a literary device.

The novels at issue have long been analyzed separately, but they have been only very scarcely compared. Some of these comparisons are focused on their narrative techniques, such as Marie Hendry's *Boundary and Longing: Narrative Modes in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and The Last Man*, or on their response to some of the Romantic period tenets, as in Shannon Phillips' *Reanimating the Creature: The Last Man as a Sequel to Frankenstein*. Nevertheless, to my knowledge, there is no study that deals specifically from a comparative perspective with the way in which Nature is conceived in both of them. It is worth highlighting Anne Mellor's contributions to the field, particularly her complete work *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters* (1988), and her collaborative book *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein* (1993). This author offers a comprehensive study of M. Shelley's life and works, which has proved an invaluable aid for this dissertation. It is necessary to highlight that, unlike *Frankenstein*, which is one of the most exanimated works ever, *The Last Man* has not received the deserved consideration it ought to have.

Since Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1974), the setting where stories take place has been revalued and re-examined, as he explicitly states: "Space (...) has now become something more than the theatre (...) its role is less and less neutral, more and more active, both as instrument and as goal, as means and as end" (411). In this way, events are no longer the only significant object of study, but also the setting and

surrounding scenery where these events take place has become a key element in literary criticism. Thus, Nature is, in literary terms, a key element to analyze, especially in those works that belong to the Romantic period. As is widely known, the Romanticism was characterized by a particular interest in Nature and the relationship human beings establish with it. Thus, in this period Nature became a literary agent more active than ever before. For this reason, I consider that the topic of this paper, the varied forms in which Nature can function, is highly significant in the field of literary studies.

This dissertation has been divided into three main chapters. The opening section, called “Nature and the Romantic Tradition,” explains the main traits that works from the Romantic period shared in relation to Nature. This section explains that this literary movement perceived Nature as a means by which to transmit diverse aspects. In this way, Nature was employed to differentiate between Burke’s ideas of the sublime and the beautiful and also as a resource for healing both the human physical frame and spirit as well as a nexus with transcendence. Besides, a more modern trend is presented, one that opens the path to analyze Nature from an ecocritical perspective. In the second and third chapters, the most prominent characteristics of the uses of Nature in both novels are analyzed, following the concepts and trends previously established, with the aim of finally concluding in the last chapter with a comparison of the novels attending to the use of Nature in them, with the intention to illustrate Nature’s multifunctional rhetorical purposes and their possible evolutions in Mary Shelley’s career as a novelist.



## 1. NATURE AND THE ROMANTIC TRADITION

In the eighteenth century, Nature became increasingly present in literary texts from two different perspectives. First, pastoral literature reclaimed ideal Arcadias. This exalted Nature corresponded with the century's great obsession: the quest for happiness. Second, exotic Nature became a literary topic through travel books. This exotic Nature's goal aimed at enabling the readers to escape from their actual social problems (Prado 160).

Eventually, Rousseau set the modern concept of Nature, one that encompasses the natural world and its relationship with human beings (Prado 160). In this way, Nature began to acquire different connotations and to correspond with novel artistic tendencies. The peak of this new conception of Nature occurred in the Romantic period, when Nature signified a refuge from the urbanized city. According to Schneider, a disregarded fact caused the origin of the Romantic veneration of Nature, and it is that in the middle of the eighteenth century many Europeans started to ascend mountains (72). Although these natural elements might have not been incredibly high, all of them were unquestionably inspiring. Indeed, this mountaineering did not only result inspiring for the climbers, but also for the witnesses of those vast mountains as in the case of the creation of Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Schneider 72). Besides, the natural world was also perceived as something so uncorrupted and pure that it inspired fear and awe (Schneider 72).

### 1.1. The Sublime

Traditionally, Platonic aesthetics had led the European, and more specifically the British, thinking. It defined beauty as something harmoniously ideal, ethical and of a common measure (Lloyd 456) as represented in Leonardo Da Vinci's *The Vitruvian Man (L'Uomo Vitruviano)* (1490). Nevertheless, in the eighteenth century, Kant's new artistic perspective broke with Plato's traditional concept of beauty and art, and it was established as the new base for modern aesthetics (López Sáenz 373). Now, the individual is an emancipated being who is able to decide his or her own models of taste, and ethics and art became two independent entities. As a consequence, the sublime and the ugly were included within the aesthetic criteria of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (González Moreno 28).

Shelley's employment of Nature in *Frankenstein* is considered mainly sublime since it corresponds with Edmund Burke's definition of the sublime as "whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (Burke 36). According to this author, vastness, obscurity and light, uniformity, and suddenness are clear sources of the sublime. These sources are commonly found in Nature. Hence, it could be asserted that Nature and the sublime are closely related and that language is the key to transmit the connection. Although Burke has always been considered the most prominent philosopher of this aesthetic movement, it was, presumably, Longinus the first author who studied the sublime. In his attributed treatise *On the Sublime*, Longinus critically examines the work of some ancient authors and establishes the traits of good writing. In this way, Longinus asserts that sublimity is achieved by means of language and that sublimity elevates both the reader's and the writer's souls, as he states: "for, as if instinctively, our soul is uplifted by the true sublime" (84).

In this way, language became the tool by which to transmit these emotions and make readers feel excited, mainly through the descriptions of sublime natural elements. This idea was subsequently developed by Burke, who argued that it is the author's mission to successfully use language to convey to the readers the terror and pain found in the sources of the sublime. Since most of these sublime passions are intrinsically related to Nature, they may come in handy for the central textual analysis of this dissertation.

In relation to the passions of the sublime, Burke states that to make a situation terrible, obscurity is required. Burke also connects this argument with the idea that everything that implies privation, such as silence, solitude or darkness, is indeed great, and therefore terrible. Burke continues explaining the different manners in which extension can take place. In this way, the author compares length, height and depth and arranges them in order of greatness.

Afterwards, the author discusses the passions of infinity and magnificence: "Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime" (129). Burke defines magnificence as a large amount of something valuable for us, and states that a huge number of a particular thing inevitably

turns that simple thing into something magnificent, and therefore sublime. To clarify this, Burke provides the example of a starry heaven and argues that stars are not magnificent (or sublime) owing to their condition of stars, but because of the fact that stars appear so profusely that they produce an effect of immensity.

### 1.2. Nature as a Restorative Agent

Among the different faculties of Nature exploited by authors, there stands out its healing power. William Wordsworth wrote his acclaimed poem “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” in which he clearly shows his interest in the natural world. This poem opens with Wordsworth’s declaration that the speaker has come back to the same spot where he was five years ago. Then, the speaker describes how the landscape of that place and its “forms of beauty” (24) evoke in him a feeling of “tranquil restoration” (31). In addition to that instant re-establishment, the speaker acknowledges that the mere memory of that natural scenery has inadvertently influenced him. Thus, it remains clear that for this author Nature possessed a healing condition, as Imane and Ilham explicitly affirm: “Wordsworth really sees nature as a source of regeneration and rebirth” (37). Besides, the speaker refers to the spirit of Nature as a type of deity and he prays to it for his sister, hoping that nature’s power aids her: “let the moon/ Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;/ And let the misty mountain winds be free/ To blow against thee” (135-8). Consequently, the way Wordsworth reflected his own communion with Nature preceded other authors from the Romantic period who followed Wordsworth’s path.

### 1.3. Nature as a Superior Entity

According to Fred Botting, the growing interest on the sublime shown by intellectuals from the eighteenth century onwards, together with the reappraisal of the traits from gothic ages, propitiated a re-evaluation of natural elements (26). Thus, Nature’s relation to art underwent a startling transformation. From then on, the greatness found in Nature served as a new way of perceiving individuality: now this natural vastness mirrored the immensity within the human soul and mind (Botting 27). This idea was first developed in Great Britain by John Baillie in his *An Essay on the Sublime* (1747), who elevated the human mind to a divine level, what inevitable displaced religion by the sublimity of Nature (85).

In this way, in the nineteenth century, Nature became sacred and, consequently, sublime landscapes filled the pages of romantic works since Nature became the way by which to express human quintessence, sometimes represented as hierarchically superior to other living beings (Abrahams 131). In this way, Nature is often considered by several Romantics to embody divinity. William Wordsworth and P. B. Shelley are representative authors of this trend. For P. B., Nature is a unifying entity that controls the whole universe, as can be perceived in *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*:

Thus let thy power, which like the truth  
Of nature on my passive youth  
Descended, to my onward life supply  
Its calm - to one who worships thee,  
And every form containing thee,  
Whom, SPIRIT fair, thy spells did bind (79- 83).

What differentiates P. B. Shelley from other Romantic poets in relation to Pantheism is that Shelley does not only regard Nature ideally as a benevolent divinity, but he is completely aware of the power of Nature (Cooper 126). This realization becomes clear in his acclaimed poem *Mont Blanc*:

Power dwells apart in its tranquillity  
Remote, serene, and inaccessible:  
And this, the naked countenance of earth,  
On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains  
Teach the adverting mind. (96-100)

In this way, for Mary Shelley's husband Nature is not only perceived as a divine spirit, but also as a powerful entity.

#### 1.4. Romanticism and Ecocriticism

Although ecocriticism is a relatively recent field in literary studies—it became prominent thirty years ago approximately (Easterlin 1)—, long-standing works can be perfectly

analyzed from an ecocritical perspective<sup>1</sup>. After all, roughly speaking, ecocriticism examines the way in which literature deals with environmental concerns and Nature so, as Johnson points out, any literary work from any period can be subjected to ecocriticism (7). This accounts for the inclusion in this paper of an ecocritical analysis of the novels at issue, *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*.

Etymologically, “eco” derives from the Greek “oikos,” which means “house.” Then, ecocriticism is the criticism of the house; in this case, the house refers to nature and the environment we live in (Hutchings 177). Although the term may suggest that ecocriticism is merely the literary study of Nature, it always sets a twofold goal: first, ecocriticism implies a moral commitment to the environment, considering it as a valuable entity; and second, ecocriticism encourages a cultural change in order to make human society ecologically feasible (Estok 221). In this way, this literary practice attempts to display those attitudes society has been adopting that have contributed to the current problematic environmental situation. Besides, ecocriticism aims at coming upon new alternatives and at promoting environmental activism. Thus, it can be asserted that ecocriticism reflects the actual relationship between society and the natural world (Hutchings 172).

In this way, since ecocriticism revalues the significance of Nature writing, a new perspective from which to consider canonical texts has consequently originated (Rigby 160). Therefore, the fact that ecocritics reflect their own values and perspective about the environment in the analysis of the texts results fascinating when it comes to a canonical works, especially from the Romantic period. According to Kevin Hutchings, “it was during the Romantic era, which witnessed a sharp rise in urban populations and an increasingly industrialized economy, that environmental problems became much more severe and noticeable, taking on a new sense of urgency” (175). Thus, it is not striking to have some Romantic authors, such as Percy Bys Shelley, explicitly lamenting the demolishing consequences of the growing urbanization of the land and industrialism (Hutchings 175). Nevertheless, these were not the only environmental problems caused by human actions; air pollution caused by coal burning is associated with the main death

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<sup>1</sup>Indeed, authors from the nineteenth century already showed their concerns about the natural world. To mention an interesting instance, a discomfort about the intake of animals for food led Mary Shelley’s husband, P. B. Shelley, to become a vegetarian as stated in his *A Vindication of Natural Diet* (1813).

rates from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in England as stated by Hatton in “Air Pollution in Victorian-era-Britain —its Effects on Health Now Revealed.” Indeed, air pollution is strongly emphasized in Charles Dickens’ novels, especially in *Hard Times* (1854):

It was a town of red brick, or of brick that would have been red if the smoke and ashes had allowed it; but as matters stood it was a town of unnatural red and black like the painted face of a savage.  
(Dickens 23)

Furthermore, poor sanitary conditions together with the ignorance showed by nineteenth-century scientists in relation to micro-organisms provoked the spread of infectious diseases. Mary Shelley represents accurately this medical nescience and predicts that infectious diseases will continue spreading even in the twenty-first century.

## 2. NATURE IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

Nature in *Frankenstein* is wittingly employed by Mary Shelley as a multifunctional device which opens the way to several perspectives and interpretations. Mary Shelley's use of natural elements is intended for stylistic issues, for the character portrayal, and for denoting awareness of the aesthetic and cultural tendencies of her time. Indeed, the writer was able to create diverse atmospheres within the text by making use of the same elements. In this way, depending on the passage, a mountain may not have any connotation and be described as just a mountain, or on the contrary it can signify something immense and terrifying. It is amazing how, although M. Shelley was only twenty-one when she published *Frankenstein*, this work suggests the intellect and wit of an experienced author. In the following section, Nature will be explored attending to four criteria: the main natural elements in the novel, the Sublime, Nature's restorative power and, finally, the ecocritical perspective.

### 2.1. The Main Natural Elements in *Frankenstein*

In this section, the different types of natural elements that appear in the novel will be categorized. Besides, those different natural sceneries will be accounted for together with the emotional transformations of the characters, especially Victor and the creature. In this way, this section will deal with how storms, rivers and lakes, mountains, and the Arctic are related to the characters' mood and personality.

#### 2.1.1. Storms

In this novel, Nature functions in a way akin to music in cinema; when watching a horror film, the soundtrack is creepy and disturbing in order to aggravate the fear instilled by the scene itself. In the same way, Nature in the novel intensifies the passages in which terrifying events take place; a trait typically found in Gothic novels. The passage when Victor is on his journey to Geneva and suddenly the creature appears is fully illustrative:

During this short voyage (...) the storm appeared to approach rapidly (...). It advanced; the heavens were clouded, and I soon felt the rain coming slowly in large drops, but its violence quickly increased. (...) the darkness and storm increased every minute, and the thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head. (...) A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its

shape plainly to me; its gigantic stature (...) instantly informed me that it was the (...) filthy daemon to whom I had given life. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 145-7)

As can be observed, the storm becomes increasingly violent as the moment of the appearance of the creature approaches. Storms are unquestionably a source of the sublime for several reasons. First, storms fill the sky with darkness, which is a terrible privation. Second, although they cause obscurity, their lightnings illuminate the objects for a very short period of time. Thus, our eyes only receive a slight piece of information about what surrounds us, what makes our imagination complete the image. Consequently, our mind is instilled with all the terrible events that could possibly occur. Finally, the noise of the thunder has the power to, in Burke's words: "overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror" (151).

However, once the creature has disappeared, the storm ceases and the atmosphere turns into a more tranquil one: "He soon reached the summit, and disappeared. I remained motionless. The thunder ceased; but the rain still continued, and the scene was enveloped in an impenetrable darkness" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 148). Thus, storms also serve to express the character's emotional progression from anxiety and terror to calmness and stillness.

### 2.1.2. *Rivers and Lakes*

As previously mentioned, natural elements are usually employed in the novel as metaphors or similes for the characters' emotional states. Quite often this device is used in relation to the character of Victor Frankenstein, as it can be seen in the following excerpt:

In drawing the picture of my early days (...) I would account to myself for the birth of that passion which (...) I find it arise, like a mountain river, from ignoble and almost forgotten sources; but (...) it became the torrent which, in its course, has swept away all my hopes and joys. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 50)

In this passage, Victor Frankenstein is comparing the passion he felt for science to a mountain river which at first seems tranquil and harmless, but it is actually a devastating force.



Interestingly enough, all the other instances related to rivers and lakes are also employed by Mary Shelley to portray Victor's negative and decaying mood. One of these passages appears in chapter 18, when Victor and Clerval join in a trip to the North Sea. On their way, they run across the river Rhine, which clearly evokes in the two characters completely different emotions:

“This is what it is to live,” he [Clerval] cried; “how I enjoy existence! But you, my dear Frankenstein, wherefore are you desponding and sorrowful?” In truth, I was occupied by gloomy thoughts, and neither saw the descent of the evening star, nor the golden sun-rise reflected in the Rhine. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 13)

The fact that this character explicitly affirms that he is not paying attention to the beautiful reflection of the sun in the water shows that the idyllic Nature described could not reflect his obscure feelings. Thus, it could be argued that Frankenstein does not fit into the landscape of harmony and beauty. Presumably, the reason for him feeling out of place might be a consequence of the fact that he has changed the natural order of things by giving life to a lifeless body. As he has surpassed the limits of Nature, it is now Nature the one which is dislocating man.

### 2.1.3. *Mountains*

The interest in mountainous landscape had its greatest impact on France, where there are three main representatives: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, François-René de Chateaubriand and Étienne Pivert de Sénancour. This last author employs mountains, especially the Mont Blanc, to symbolize the grandeur of Nature in contrast with the vulnerability of man in his famous novel *Obermann* (1804). Thus, at the beginning of the nineteenth century there were already literary references of the magnificence of this mountain (Prado 160). Hence, Mary Shelley could have based the Mont Blanc references she included in *Frankenstein* on this French writer's novel (Donada). Nevertheless, Sénancour may have not been the only inspiration for Mary Shelley's composition of her novel, but also her husband is often considered to have constituted an invaluable source of inspiration for her. In this way, P. B. Shelley's poem *Mont Blanc* may have served as a new perspective from which to perceive Nature (Mellor, *Mary Shelley* 172).

The highest mountain of the Alps plays a vital role in Mary Shelley's novel as a symbol of the inexorable and invincible majesty of Nature: "and above it rose Mont Blanc, in awful majesty. I remained in a recess of the rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 21). Although at first the character of Victor seems to be capable of mastering Nature, Mont Blanc appears in the novel to remind this character that the limits of Nature cannot be surpassed. Indeed, Victor Frankenstein always denotes respect and admiration for the mountain, and even affection:

I discovered more distinctly the black sides of Jura, and the bright summit of Mont Blanc; I wept like a child: "Dear mountains! (...) how do you welcome your wanderer? Your summits are clear; the sky and lake are blue and placid. Is this to prognosticate peace, or to mock at my unhappiness?" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 143)

In addition to this argument, it is interesting to observe that some of the encounters between Frankenstein and the creature occur in the immediacies of Mont Blanc. In chapter 10, Victor ascends Mount Montanvert, from where he views and describes the majesty of Mont Blanc right before the idyllic scene is interrupted by the creature:

Above it rose Mont Blanc, in awful majesty. I remained in a recess of the rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene. The sea, or rather the vast river of ice, wound among its dependent mountains (...) My heart, which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy; I exclaimed --- "Wandering spirits, if indeed ye wander, and do not rest in your narrow beds, allow me this faint happiness, or take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life." (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 21-2)

As Victor will later affirm: "those were the last moments of my life during which I enjoyed the feeling of happiness" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 111).

#### 2.1.4. *The Arctic*

Although the North Pole was first reached in the first years of the twentieth century, and the Northeast and Northwest passages were not accomplished until 1878, Mary Shelley included detailed depictions of this region of the Earth. Actually, polar regions attracted the English attention considerable since it was perceived as an unknown land which ought to be explored, not only for Romantic reasons, but also for social and economic ones (Lanone 203). In the novel, the author emphasizes the fact that the sun was always visible: "its broad disk just skirting the horizon, and diffusing a perpetual splendour" (Shelley,

*Frankenstein* 2). John Milton's arctic descriptions in *Paradise Lost* (1667) coincide with those made by Walton in *Frankenstein*, as Beck affirms:

Both Mary Shelley's well-known familiarity with *Paradise Lost*, which had been renewed just before she began the composition of *Frankenstein*, and the equally well-known far-reaching and complex intertextual relationship between Milton's epic and *Frankenstein*, make the Miltonic source for Walton's North Pole appear to be highly plausible. (27-28)

Apart from the Miltonian inspiration, it can also be asserted that S. T. Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798) had a major impact on the composition of *Frankenstein*. Coleridge's long poem is cited several times in Shelley's work by Frankenstein and Walton. The parallelism between Walton and the mariner from Coleridge's poem is evident since both characters share the aspiration to explore polar areas, and they both become victims of the terrible conditions of those regions. Similarly, the characters of Walton and Frankenstein resemble those of the wedding guest and the mariner in the sense that both Walton and the wedding guest are shocked by the stories they are told by Frankenstein and the mariner respectively.

The first character introduced in *Frankenstein*, Robert Walton, reaches the pole in his quest for discovering the secrets of science. Thus, his motivation and the views he sees of such an indomitable and immense part of the Earth makes this character be genuinely enthusiastic:

Inspired by this wind of promise, my day dreams become more fervent and vivid. I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 2)

Nevertheless, by the end of the novel Walton's enthusiasm about the Arctic decreases considerably. The celebrating attitude of the first pages has turned into desperation and desolation. The series of events reported by Victor, together with the extreme climatological conditions makes Walton's words to acquire a pessimistic and gloomy tone: "We are still surrounded by mountains of ice, still in imminent danger of being crushed in their conflict. The cold is excessive, and many of my unfortunate comrades have already found a grave amidst this scene of desolation" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 166). These extreme conditions of the North Pole are the location of the last passages in which Victor Frankenstein raises his voice; an encouraging speech to Walton's crew about never

surrendering. It is in the Arctic setting where Victor Frankenstein passes away. Nature here has lost its healing power and Mary Shelley represents this region as a lifeless world or the place where life ends.

## 2.2. The Sublime in *Frankenstein*

In Gothic fiction, imagination plays a vital role since this sort of literature originated as a reaction against the rational thinking of the Enlightenment. Therefore, since the aim was to go beyond reason, Nature acquired sentimental connotations usually with the intention of transgressing moral laws. Thus, desolated landscapes, abysmal storms and immense mountainous sceneries are themes frequently employed in Gothic fiction due to the admiration and appeal they inevitably cause upon the audience (Botting 2). Undoubtedly, these boundless devices appear in *Frankenstein*. Although Nature imagery became a recurrent device at the time, the reasons that led this author to emphasize the sublimity of Nature in such a way might have been slightly dissimilar from those of the rest of her contemporary authors. Two years before the publication of *Frankenstein*, some climate abnormalities led to baptize 1816 as “the year without a summer.” Heavy storms and cool temperatures destroyed British and Irish harvests, and their inhabitants had to emigrate in quest of nourishment. According to Bill Phillips, this terrible climate conditions had great significance for Mary Shelley and for the conception of her novel (Phillips 59).

The journals of Mary Shelley offer a detailed exploration of the event in her life. In July 1816, Mary went on an expedition to the Valley of Chamouni accompanied by her stepsister Claire Clairmont and her husband P. B. Shelley. Interestingly, M. Shelley’s somber descriptions of huge glaciers and rocks, torrential rains, and vast mountains are recurrent in her journal: “Nothing can be more desolate than the ascent of this mountain — the trees in many places have been torn away by avalanches and some half leaning over others intermingled with stones present the appearance of vast & dreadful desolation” (Shelley, *Journals* 117). Thus, it is not surprising to find authors, like Bill Phillips, who affirm that *Frankenstein*’s focus on Nature derives from the author’s personal experience (63).

There is a wide body of literature on *Frankenstein*’s peculiar use of sublime Nature, ranging from mere descriptions to perceptive and nuanced interpretations. Matthew Brennan offers a psychological and biographical explanation for the landscape

material of the text. Brennan affirms that the novel was “the result of her unresolved grief for her mother’s death” (*apud* Bloom 117). He goes on to assert that Nature was for Mary Shelley an escape route for her conscious and loss-centered mind (*apud* Bloom 118). However, Hunter contrarily affirms that, although the climate conditions inevitably influenced her, Shelley was a brilliant writer who was acutely aware of the prominence of natural sceneries she ought to give to her novel (ii).

Burke’s distinction between the sublime and the beautiful can be spotted in the text in the opposition between the characters of Victor and Clerval. Besides, the contrast between the sublime and the beautiful is also represented in the duality between Victor and the creature, especially at the beginning of the text. At first, the creature is attracted by the beautiful elements found in Nature, while Victor is always appealed by its sublime side. However, as the story goes on, the creature’s evil side begins to lead his actions, and eventually the beautiful is replaced by the sublime (González Moreno 50). In relation to the characters of Victor and Clerval, it remains evident throughout all the text that the former stands for the sublime side of Nature while the latter represents the beautiful side. Victor Frankenstein is a man tormented by his mistaken decisions on life and their catastrophic consequences. Some of the main traits that characterize sublime aesthetics are vastness, infinity and magnitude in building. These features are all located in one of the key passages of the work, which is when Victor Frankenstein ascends the Mont Blanc<sup>2</sup>:

We beheld immense mountains and precipices overhanging us on every side (...) as we ascended still higher, the valley assumed a more magnificent and astonishing character. Ruined castles hanging on the precipices of piny mountains (...) the mighty Alps, whose white and shining pyramids and domes towered above all, as belonging to another earth, the habitations of another race of beings. (Shelley *Frankenstein* 12-3).

The narration of this event is portrayed by M. Shelley as firstly beautiful but then transformed into something sublime: “[This] formed a scene of singular beauty. But it was augmented and rendered sublime” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 13). According to

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<sup>2</sup>The theme of the Mont Blanc as a literary setting was also used by M. Shelley’s husband, P. B. Shelley, in one of his poems published a year before *Frankenstein*.

González Moreno, Victor's ascent to this mountain is not only a physical climbing, but also an emotional one, which highlights the relevance of the scene (171). It can be asserted that Victor Frankenstein needs the sublime and not the beautiful since it is the former category the one that can represent this character's tortured, shattered and somber soul.

On the other hand, Henry Clerval stands for the opposition to Victor Frankenstein; Clerval represents the beautiful. In his *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke describes beauty as "that quality (...) in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it" (83). Thus, beauty has the power to evoke affection and tenderness (Quinton 72), two features which are easily applicable to the character of Clerval. Besides, Burke's description of the beautiful implies that this category can only be conceived within society (González Moreno 154), as opposed to the sublime which is characterized by its association with loneliness and isolation. This trait applies to Clerval since he is described as a man whose "dream was to become one among those names are recorded in story as the gallant and adventurous benefactors of our species" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831) 24-5). In relation to landscape, Clerval is frequently absorbed in beautiful scenery (González Moreno 157), as Frankenstein claims:

How great was the contrast between us! He was alive (...), joyful when he saw the beauties of the setting sun (...). He pointed out to me the shifting colours of the landscape, and the appearances of the sky. "This is what it is to live," he cried, "how I enjoy existence." (Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831) 135-6)

Therefore, it is undeniable that landscape is employed by Mary Shelley as a means of intensifying the distinction between the characters' opposed personalities.

Another important point to make is related to the "genderization" of both traits. Traditionally, the concept of the sublime has always been considered superior than the beautiful, and associated with darkness, power and strength, whereas the beautiful has been regarded as light, charming, and delicate. For this reason, the sublime has often been perceived as masculine, and the beautiful as feminine (Shaw 139). This "genderization" is clear in Mary Shelley's narrative work. The identification of Nature as female in *Frankenstein* — "I pursued nature to her hiding-places (Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831) 40) — and the fact that it is a man the one who is exploiting and penetrating into the mysteries of female Nature and reproduction denotes the cultural view of women as passive and

submissive (Mellor, *Possessing Nature* 282). However, the novel's denouement shows Shelley's criticism: Mother Nature cannot be controlled or dominated by any man.

### 2.3. Nature as a Restorative Agent in *Frankenstein*

Nature is also used by the author as a restorative agent for Victor Frankenstein. For this character, Nature is therapeutic since, although it has not the power to heal his emotional injuries, it is a way for him to evade his pain. The healing power of Nature can be perceived when Victor claims "These sublime and magnificent scenes<sup>3</sup> afforded me the greatest consolation that I was capable of receiving" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 16). Indeed, this view of Nature as a restorative agent is also identified in the character of Caroline Beaufort, as the narrator states "they sought the pleasant climate of Italy (...) as a restorative for her weakened frame" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 17). However, it is in the characters of Victor and the creature that the healing capacity of Nature is most obvious since Catherine's improvement is physical and not emotional.

#### 2.3.1. *Victor Frankenstein*

After Victor succeeds at "infusing life into an inanimate body" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 36), he falls terribly ill and, apparently, Clerval becomes the only aid by which he can truly recover. Victor's disease was healed against all odds and the real reason for his restoration is that he began to pay attention to the leaves that fall gently from the trees, which were replaced by small buds. This ideal beginning of a new season "contributed greatly to my [Victor's] convalescence" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 111). Victor's sustenance from Nature is present all along the novel, what makes Nature to be perceived by the audience and by the character himself as his personal therapy.

One of the passages in which Frankenstein needs Nature's consolation the most corresponds to the scene when the creature murders Victor's brother, William, and Justine is unfairly executed. After this tragic event, Victor is terribly affected and looks for support in Nature:

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<sup>3</sup>These scenes refer to "Abrupt sides of vast mountains, (...) icy wall of the glacier (...) shattered pines, (...) and the solemn silence of this glorious presence-chamber of imperial nature" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1831) 80).



I remained two days at Lausanne, in this painful state of mind. I contemplated the lake: the waters were placid; all around was calm, and the snowy mountains, “the palaces of nature<sup>4</sup>,” were not changed. By degrees the calm and heavenly scene restored me, and I continued my journey towards Geneva. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 142-3)

Up to this point, the healing power that Nature professes on Frankenstein has been shown in terms of the direct relationship between both. However, Nature’s capacity of restoration is also present in the novel in the relationship between Victor and the rest of the characters. In chapter 9, Victor’s father takes the family to Belrive to make Victor peace with his past. The word “Belrive” means “beautiful shore” and the place is located in the north of Geneva. In the story, this is where Frankenstein witnesses the electric storm that arouses his curiosity about science. In this passage, the narrator lets the readers know that Victor does not need his father’s help, or anybody else’s help, but Nature’s. At Belrive, he seeks Nature, and it is in fact those moments when Victor can enjoy Nature alone what fills him with an air of freedom and peace:

About this time we retired to our house at Belrive. This change was particularly agreeable to me. The shutting of the gates regularly at ten o’clock, and the impossibility of remaining on the lake after that hour, had rendered our residence within the walls of Geneva very irksome to me. I was now free. Often, after the rest of the family had retired for the night, I took the boat, and passed many hours upon the water. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 4)

Victor’s need for Nature to maintain his terrible feelings repressed is also known by other characters in the novel, especially by his wife, Elizabeth. According to William Ames (“On Nature in *Frankenstein*”, in one passage after the wedding, Elizabeth resorts to Nature in order to make her husband forget about his fatalities:

Observe how fast we move along, and how the clouds which sometimes obscure, and sometimes rise above the dome of Mont Blanc, render this scene of beauty still more interesting. Look also at the innumerable fish that are swimming in the clear waters, where we can distinguish every pebble that lies at the bottom. What a divine day! How happy and serene all nature appears! (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 113).

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4 “The palaces of nature” is a reference to Lord Byron’s narrative poem *Child Harold’s Pilgrimage*.



Thus, Victor's dependency on Nature to maintain his sanity and physical health is undeniable. It could even be stated that Victor's reliance on Nature is of an obsessive kind since he is in constant search for Nature to get rid of diseases and dreadful remorse.

### 2.3.2. *The Creature*

Just as the newborn he is, at first the creature does not understand natural phenomena, what makes him feel confused, disoriented and vulnerable. One of the most revealing passages in connection with this is the scene when the creature experiences cold for the first time: "I was a poor, hopeless, miserable wretch, I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but, feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 34). Therefore, it could be asserted that the first contact the creature had with Nature was adverse. Nonetheless, as long as the creature increases his interaction with Nature, he starts to feel differently. Soon afterwards, the creature describes how the light of the moon installed him with a feeling of joy: "Soon a gentle light stole over the heavens and gave me a sensation of pleasure" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 34). Thus, although Nature was first perceived by this character with a sense of bewilderment, he soon learns to appreciate and enjoy it. In this respect, the creature also finds pleasure in other natural elements, such as the songs of birds and the beauty of the forest. It is interesting to see how the creature experiences his first spring:

Spring advanced rapidly; the weather became fine, and the skies cloudless. It surprised me, that what before was desert and gloomy should now bloom with the most beautiful flowers and verdure. My senses were gratified and refreshed by a thousand scents of delight, and a thousand sights of beauty. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 69)

Although Nature does not actually function as a restorative agent as precisely as in the case of Frankenstein, it provokes in the creature a feeling of relief. Besides, the positive emotions caused by the power of Nature made the creature forget about his creator's rejection. In a way, it could be stated that the creature replaced the parental figure of his absent creator by Nature. Nevertheless, the creature's pleasant feelings towards the natural elements around him come to an end when he is chased and shot after having saved a woman from drowning. This unfair event made a change in the creature's mind, and both humanity and the natural world began to be perceived as ungraceful and unpleasant.

After being disappointed about the DeLaceys, anger consumed the creature. Right before taking revenge on this family, the creature describes how a mysterious wind starts to blow up and makes him feel uncontrollably outraged:

As the night advanced, a fierce wind arose from the woods, and quickly dispersed the clouds that had loitered in the heavens: the blast tore along like a mighty avalanche, and produced a kind of insanity in my spirits, that burst all bounds of reason and reflection. I lighted the dry branch of a tree, and danced with fury around the devoted cottage, my eyes still fixed on the western horizon, the edge of which the moon nearly touched (...) The wind fanned the fire, and the cottage was quickly enveloped by the flames, which clung to it, and licked it with their forked and destroying tongues. (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 127-8)

In this passage Nature does not provide the creature with restoration and tranquility, but rather it encourage the creature to hysterically set the family's cottage on fire.

#### 2.4. Ecocriticism and *Frankenstein*

Although the different natural elements found in the novel may be quite related to ecology, the body of literature dealing with an ecocritical analysis of *Frankenstein* is incredibly reduced. The reason for this little ecocritical consideration is associated with the excessive attention that this novel has received since its very early publication in 1818, which might have led to an incomplete examination. Morton affirms that the universality of the novel has turned it into a type of myth, which has transformed the story's original format and has exceeded its author (*Frankenstein and Ecocriticism* 143).

The ecocritical analysis of the novel will be carried out attending to two core elements: the difference between the human and the non-human and the use of science, which include both Frankenstein's and Walton's insatiable thirst for surpassing Nature.

##### 2.4.1. *The Human and The Non-Human*

Several authors from the Romantic period (including Mary Shelley) pursued the reevaluation of the Natural world. It has also been claimed that everything that is constructed is human. Ecocriticism has pioneered the distinction between the human world and the non-human world. However, what happens when an author like Mary Shelley blends these two opposite spheres into the same novel?

M. Shelley underlines the enormous power of Nature at the same time that she grants a human being, Victor Frankenstein, with the capacity of creating artificial life. The ecocritical claim in this respect is done by the author through the way in which this artificial creation is perceived by the characters, i.e. with horror and awe. Shelley's opposition is also achieved by means of the rejection that the creature suffers from its creator. This human-like god, this intelligible god, is horrified by what he has generated, which differs greatly from any natural law. In the sensible world, creators are benevolent and they are meant to love their creations, not to be afraid of them. This has been traditionally interpreted in the light of the influence of Milton's *Paradise Lost*: the character of Victor Frankenstein aims at becoming God, just like Satan did. Ecocriticism has added a new perceptive view of the problem, very much in tune with the Shelleys' concerns. In this way, the resemblance may be read as Mary Shelley's warning not to transgress the natural order of things. Thus, the ecocritical perspective of Mary Shelley's novel functions as a means of differentiating between the Human and the Non-Human, to re-evaluate the absolute power of Nature, and to caution readers not to alter the established order of the elements.

#### 2.4.2. *The Use of Science*

Nature is wittingly employed by Mary Shelley in her work to transmit moral messages, as that found in chapter 4: "How dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge, and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (Shelley *Frankenstein* 86-7). In this excerpt, Mary Shelley aims at opposing two different types of Nature: human and divine Nature. This has also been the usual reading of Goethe's *Faust*. Both in *Frankenstein* and in *Faust*, there is an opposition between human and non-human Nature, and the moral message that human Nature cannot occupy a superior status. This is the idea that Mary Shelley wishes to shape in the readers' mind: that the employment of science to master Nature is a dreadful mistake. Thus, catastrophic events start to happen after the creature comes to life and he feels the rejection of his creator. According to Sherwin, the disastrous history of the story is the result of the transgression and the sin that Frankenstein commits against Nature (883). In the novel, Victor becomes obsessed with discovering the secrets of Nature after he witnesses an impressive thunderbolt lightning at the age of fifteen.

Shelley's moral in the story is that no matter how hard human beings try to overcome Nature, its power cannot be surpassed.

The character of Walton is also connected with this human arrogance over Nature, in a lower scale though. Walton's quest for the North Pole is motivated by the craving he had for discovering the "wondrous power which attracts the needle; and may regulate a thousand celestial observations, that require only this voyage to render their seeming eccentricities consistent for ever" (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 3). Although the consequences of Walton's fanatical voyage are not as fatal as those of Frankenstein's monstrous creation, the story closes with Walton's encounter with the creature and with Frankenstein's corpse in his ship. If Walton had not been so obsessed about reaching the Arctic, he would not have experienced those traumatic events. Nonetheless, this can also be interpreted as the offer of a second chance and the lesson that Nature cannot be tamed.

### 3. NATURE IN *THE LAST MAN*

In Mary Shelley's apocalyptic novel, *The Last Man* (1826), the demolishing effects of a plague lead to the destruction of humankind. By the time Mary Shelley wrote her novel, she had already suffered the loss of her most beloved ones: her husband, children<sup>5</sup>, and friends. These series of terrible events might have been the reason why the author does not include obvious examples of Nature to exemplify or transmit her own feelings or opinion, as she had previously done. Rather, Mary Shelley focuses her novel on the terrible event of a plague that puts an end to mankind. This plague has often been considered as a natural element by some scholars like Audrey Fisch, who affirms that: "Nature [appears] personified as and exemplified by the Plague" (267). Apart from this major natural catastrophe, the other instances of Nature provided by the author in her *roman à clef* appear in such a subtle manner that they have received little attention by literary critics. In this way, the natural elements analyzed in this section do not correspond with those accounted for in the previous part on *Frankenstein*. The only aspects that both works share are the use of the sublime in Nature and the image of glaciers and frozen lands. Nevertheless, this paper will deal with some new aspects found in the novel, such as the plague, a feminist perspective on Nature in *The Last Man*, and a distinction between internal and external landscapes in the novel.

#### 3.1. The Sublime

It was in 1814 when Mary Shelley and her husband Percy Shelley visited the Louvre for the first time. Among the several extraordinary works of art, Nicolas Poussin's portrayal of the biblical flood, *Le Deluge*, stroke them the most. Consequently, this painting has often been considered Mary Shelley's source of inspiration for the sublime descriptions of her novels (Rowney 171). Indeed, the painting's representation of a small group of people and its pervasively disturbing calmness have usually be found in M. Shelley's *The Last Man* (Rowney 172).

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<sup>5</sup> Percy Florence was her only surviving child.

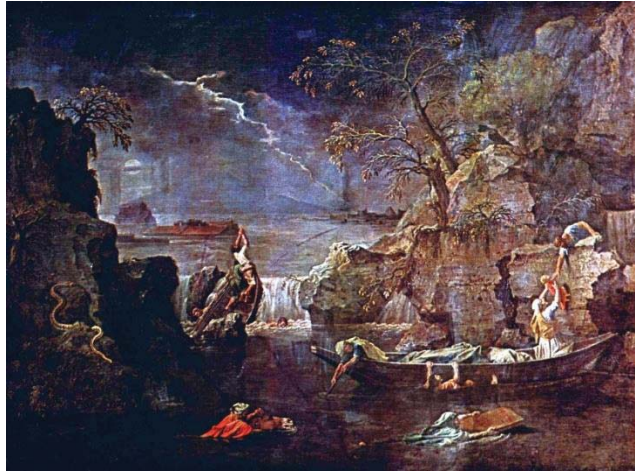


Fig. 1. *Le Deluge* (1660) by Nicolas Poussin.

Particularly, it is a passage from the third volume the one that best represents Poussin's surreal painting (Bickley xx). This passage relates the event when the main characters are about to depart from England at Dover and suddenly they are halted by an impetuous storm. It is in this moment when, all of a sudden, three meteorite-like suns cross the sky leaving an apocalyptic and sublime scene:

Three other suns, alike burning and brilliant, rushed from various quarters of the heavens towards the great orb (...) The glare of light was intense to our dazzled eyes; the sun itself seemed to join in the dance, while the sea burned like a furnace, like all Vesuvius a-light, with flowing lava beneath. The horses broke loose from their stalls in terror—a herd of cattle, panic struck, raced down to the brink of the cliff, and blinded by light, plunged down with frightful yells in the waves below (...) Suddenly the three mock suns united in one, and plunged into the sea. A few seconds afterwards, a deafening watery sound came up with awful peal from the spot where they had disappeared. (Shelley, *The Last Man* 296)

As the story unfolds, a transition from the beautiful to the sublime becomes obvious, as Mishra asserts: “Nature (...) implies a shifting of the sign from the beautiful, orderly harmonies of phenomena to the unimaginable abyss of the sublime” (178). At the beginning, most of the natural elements described in the text correspond to Burke's definition of the beautiful:

There was a glade, O reader! a grassy opening in the wood; the retiring trees left its velvet expanse as a temple for love; the silver Thames bounded it on one side, and a willow bending down dipped in the water its Naiad hair, dishevelled by the wind's viewless hand. The oaks around were the home of a tribe of nightingales (...) The river swollen by autumnal rains, deluged the low lands. (Shelley, *The Last Man* 63).

Nevertheless, after the characters have realized of the existence of the plague, natural descriptions begin to acquire the characteristic gloomy tone of the sublime: “The scenes which now surround us, vast and sublime as they are, are not such as can best contribute to this work. Nature is here like our fortunes, grand, but too destructive (...) to afford delight to her young imagination” (Shelley, *The Last Man* 341).

Undoubtedly, the conception of the plague and its subsequent apocalypse is the most prominent example of the sublime. As Bickley notes, the most salient source of the sublime is terror, and there is nothing that provokes terror to such a level than the consciousness and realization of death (xxvii). This idea is highlighted by Cove’s assertion that the vulnerability of human kind to infection fills this story with a feeling of horror that “freezes the body and isolates the individual” (33). Besides, the plague’s unknown causes make the characters incapable of fighting them. Thus, they become helpless against this powerful natural element, what inevitable increases the plague’s sublime nature. As Snyder explicitly states, “The primary terror posed by the plague is that it constitutes a phenomenon which defies all referential sense” (*apud* Mishra 177). Therefore, the characters’ inability to uncover the sources and the causes of the plague substantially increase the novel’s sublimity. Besides, the characters’ ignorance consequently disables the law of reason, what inevitably implies a loss of security; a characteristic trait of the Gothic sublime (Mishra 186). In this way, the Earth in the story has become a purely sublime setting: it is no longer a safe place to live, but an insecure land full of uncertainties that invalidate the human capacity of reasoning.

Finally, sublime Nature is also employed in the novel to differentiate and contrast the two main male characters, Raymond and Adrian:

Raymond was emphatically a man of the world. His passions were violent; as these often obtained the mastery over him, he could not always square his conduct to the obvious line of self-interest, but self-gratification at least was the paramount object with him. (...) The earth was spread out as an highway for him; the heavens built up as a canopy for him.

Adrian (...) owned affinity not only with mankind, but all nature was akin to him; the mountains and sky were his friends; the winds of heaven and the offspring of earth his playmates; (...) His soul was sympathy, and dedicated to the worship of beauty and excellence. Adrian and Raymond now came into contact, and a spirit of aversion rose between them. Adrian despised the narrow



views of the politician, and Raymond held in supreme contempt the benevolent visions of the philanthropist. (Shelley, *The Last Man* 34)

In this way, it is observable how Raymond is associated with violence and action, while Adrian is perceived as submissive and passive. For this reason, Raymond has been usually identified with the sublime, whereas Adrian is normally related to the beauty in Nature.

### 3.2. Icy Landscape

As has been previously accounted for in this paper, the icy landscape of the North was, for Mary Shelley, a sign of desolation and desperation. Indeed, there are already some records of the author's gloomy view of the Arctic —especially of glaciers— before the publication of *Frankenstein* in her travel narrative *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817), jointly composed with P.B. Shelley:

The verge of a glacier (...) presents the most vivid image of desolation that it is possible to conceive. No one dares to approach it; for the enormous pinnacles of ice which perpetually fall, are perpetually reproduced. The pines of the forest, which bound it at one extremity, are overthrown and shattered to a wide extent at its base. There is something inexpressibly dreadful in the aspect of the few branchless trunks, which, nearest to the ice rifts, still stand in the uprooted soil. The meadows perish, overwhelmed with sand and stones. (42)

In this work, the Arctic appears in different manners and for different purposes. Indeed, the fact that M. Shelley describes this region as “the most vivid image of desolation that it is possible to conceive” (Idem) and that she later employs that image in her novel results particularly interesting. As pointed out at the beginning of this section, Mary Shelley's personal circumstances at the time she wrote the novel were certainly desolate. Nature may have been employed by the author to portray her own grief and misery.

Moreover, after the plague has struck the Earth, the remaining characters come back to England, which is described in terms quite similar to those employed for the Arctic region:

It was a melancholy thing to return to this spot so dear to us, as the scene of a happiness rarely before enjoyed, here to mark the extinction of our species, and trace the deep uneraseable footsteps of disease over the fertile and cherished soil. The aspect of the country had so far changed (...) Heavy falls of snow gave an arctic appearance to the scenery; the roofs of the houses peeped from



the white mass (...) the prevalence of a north-east wind rendered out-door exertions extremely painful. (Shelley, *The Last Man* 245).

This passage has proved to be truly valuable since it does not relate how the characters go to the Arctic, but rather how the Arctic comes to the characters. In other words, M. Shelley might be intending to portray the whole Earth as empty and deserted as the arctic land after the catastrophic consequences of the plague. Again, this landscape corresponds to M. Shelley's gloomy view of the Arctic and the glaciers stated in her journals.

Similarly, the identification of the Arctic as devastated and desolated is even clearer in the passage of Clara and Evelyn's funeral:

Adrian and I, leaving Clara and Evelyn wrapt in peaceful unobserving slumber, carried the body to this desolate spot, and placed it in those caves of ice beneath the glacier, which rive and split with the slightest sound, and bring destruction on those within the clefts—no bird or beast of prey could here profane the frozen form (...) We placed the dead on a bier of ice, and then, departing, stood on the rocky platform beside the river springs (...) The snowy mountains and blue glaciers shone in their own light (...) Mont Anvert, was opposite to us, the glacier at our side; at our feet Arveiron, white and foaming, dashed over the pointed rocks that jutted into it (...) Yellow lightnings played around the vast dome of Mont Blanc, silent as the snow-clad rock they illuminated; all was bare, wild, and sublime, while the singing of the pines in melodious murmurings added a gentle interest to the rough magnificence (...) Such the church-yard, such the requiem, such the eternal congregation, that waited on our companion's funeral! (Shelley, *The Last Man* 339).

The fact that the setting chosen for Clara and Evelyn's funeral is the icy region surrounding Mont Anvert and Mont Blanc makes it clear the strong connection not only between the northern landscapes and the feeling of desolation after the plague, but also between the Arctic and death. In relation to the excerpt itself, it is worth highlighting the ice-related terms consistently employed to describe the scene: ice, glacier, frozen form, snowy mountains, snow-clad rocks, etc. All these terms fill the passage with a dreadful sense of dehumanization, which mirrors both the characters' and the author's inner state. Besides, the fact that Mary Shelley describes a funeral using the semantic field of the Arctic emphasizes its peculiar melancholic and somber connotations. This idea of desolation and melancholy was not new to the author since her husband had also employed it in his poem *Mont Blanc*. As Wilson asserts, "In the poem, the glaciers, seemingly dead things, serve as animated revelations of hidden fate" (55). In this way,

Nature accurately represents the characters' mood in the novel, but also Mary Shelley's own devastated soul. As Lokke claims, "Mother Nature in *The Last Man* is utterly oblivious to her human progeny and their tragic fate" (117).

### 3.3. The Plague and Ecocriticism

The most salient and distinguishable natural element of the novel is, undoubtedly, the plague. The little attention paid to the other forms of Nature in M. Shelley's work contrasts with the several different analyses and interpretations that have been made about the plague. In this respect, this natural disaster works as a multifunctional device for denoting the breaking of a nation, the loss of identity, and death.

As a *roman à clef*, the novel presents several situations as merely fictional, but they actually refer to real events in Mary Shelley's life. In this line, the plague provokes the migration and mobility of the main characters and of the rest of the inhabitants of the world in search of protection, which can be interpreted as the author's pessimistic view of her own country. Indeed, Olivia Zolciak affirms that: "Instead of using nature as a metaphor (...) or explicitly emphasizing a longing for nature, Shelley exemplifies the literal sickness of the nation through the metaphor of the plague" (40). Some years before the publication of the novel, George III had died after a reign of sixty years and he was succeeded by his son, George IV. This monarch became particularly unpopular owing to his scandalous private life. In addition, one year prior to the novel's publication, Mary Shelley witnessed a financial crisis that resulted in the closure of several English banks (Rowney 172). Thus, this unwanted political change and the disastrous economic situation might have been the real incidents that M. Shelley metaphorically represented in her novel.

As the plague progresses, the characters' only concern is to find a spot where they can be safe and sound. Thus, significant places become mere spaces, since the emotional connections to those places are completely lost: "Yet let us go! England is in her shroud,—we may not enchain ourselves to a corpse. Let us go—the world is our country now, and we will choose for our residence its most fertile spot" (Shelley, *The Last Man* 260). As opposed to places, spaces are wild and free, and they offer no shelter, what makes us vulnerable and exposed. Consequently, if one loses his/her nation, one loses his/her identity, as the character of Verney claims:

Thus, losing our identity, that of which we are chiefly conscious, we glory in the continuity of our species, and learn to regard death without terror. But when any whole nation becomes the victim of the destructive powers of exterior agents, then indeed man shrinks into insignificance, he feels his tenure of life insecure, his inheritance on earth cut off. (Shelley, *The Last Man* 184)

As Yi-Fu Tuan claims, “In open space, one can become intensely aware of place; and in the solitude of a sheltered place the vastness of space beyond acquires a haunting presence” (54). In this way, the plague and its consequent population’s migration provide this novel with the characteristic Gothic tone of the era:

One word alone fell, as it were involuntarily, from his convulsed lips: *The Plague*.—‘Where?’—‘Every where—we must fly—all fly—but whither? No man can tell—there is no refuge on earth, it comes on us like a thousand packs of wolves—we must all fly—where shall you go? Where can any of us go?’ (Shelley, *The Last Man* 193)

Apart from contributing to the novel’s gloomy atmosphere and to represent the author’s surrounding political circumstances, the plague also functions as a device for representing death. More specifically, the motif of the plague has been usually identified as Mary Shelley’s own grief for the loss of her husband, children and good friend, Lord Byron (Mishra 172). As Olivia Zolciak affirms, “Apocalyptic literature uses destruction and death as a symbol for societal problems, but it also emphasizes the personal anxieties that are projected and transcribed through an intensified, exaggerated reality” (4). This novel is full of metaphors and identifications that correspond to the author’s personal events, as Bickley literally notes: “in this text above all others it is impossible to ignore the complex interactions between the tragedies of Mary Shelley’s life and her art” (viii). In this way, the main characters of the story are often associated with M. Shelley’s circle of family and friends: Adrian is an idealized portrait of her beloved Percy Shelley and Raymond corresponds to Lord Byron. Similarly, Lionel’s sister, Perdita, has been traditionally identified with Mary Shelley’s step-sister, Claire Clairmont<sup>6</sup>. Nevertheless, it is not only the author’s family members the ones represented in the novel, but also Mary Shelley herself. In this way, some authors such as Bickley argue that M. Shelley is

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<sup>6</sup> This fictional character finally achieves her fantasy of marrying Lord Byron —Raymond—. However, M. Shelley’s fatal denouncement to this union is the suicide committed by Claire’s avatar, Perdita, after realizing her husband’s infidelity with a Greek princess (Fisch 110).

represented in the character of Verney, in the sense that he was the only survivor to the plague, just like M. Shelley was the only survivor to her family's misfortunes (xii).

The inescapable plague makes death seem even more obvious and present. Thus, every spot is perceived by the characters as their tombs. Once the plague has spread, there is no home anymore; there are just places to die. However, it is worth highlighting that none of the main characters of the novel dies because of the plague, but due to other unexpected events. Indeed, the fact that the main characters die of such senseless causes fills the story with awe. Robert Snyder argues that the plague “assumes demonic potentiality” and becomes a nightmare that haunts the characters (437). Besides, the characters' —and readers'— ignorance of the origin and/or causes of this plague fills the story with absolute terror. As a basis for the comparison of the two novels at issue, it could be argued that the plague in *The Last Man* and Nature in *Frankenstein* work similarly. In the former novel, the plague's disastrous effects can be interpreted as the consequence of humans' sense of superiority towards Nature, just like the misleading and arrogant actions against Nature performed by Victor Frankenstein lead to a series of unfortunate events. Besides, the plague and Nature also share the characteristic of denoting the Earth's unbeatable power in both *The Last Man* and *Frankenstein* respectively. In the former, contrary to the devastating effects of the plague on mankind, the Earth remains imposingly indifferent (Bailes 695). Similarly, although Nature's majesty affects negatively most of the characters of *Frankenstein*, it seems as if the Earth does not take any notice of this.

### 3.4. Internal Landscapes

In *The Last Man*, Nature is not only represented in its literal meaning as physical landscape, but it also functions as the representation of the imagination and the subconscious. In this way, external landscapes correspond to the physical world, while internal landscapes are usually associated with the inner world. According to Lisa Hopkins, external and internal landscapes have a close relation in *The Last Man*, and they need to be mutually analyzed (par. 8). In fact, the character of Lionel Verney literally acknowledges this correlation:

But curiosity soon awoke (...) I was already well acquainted with what I may term the panorama of nature, the change of seasons, and the various appearances of heaven and earth. But I was at

once startled and enchanted by my sudden extension of vision, when the curtain, which had been drawn before the intellectual world, was withdrawn, and I saw the universe, not only as it presented itself to my outward senses, but as it had appeared to the wisest among men. (Shelley, *The Last Man* 23)

Verney's realization of the internal landscape underlying the external one does cause an effect in the character. This discovery makes Verney feel as a sailor who has just reached the American shore for the first time<sup>7</sup>: "I had lived in what is generally called the world of reality, and it was awakening to a new country to find that there was a deeper meaning in all I saw, besides that which my eyes conveyed to me" (Shelley, *The Last Man* 23). According to Hopkins, the most remarkable aspect of this passage is the author's insistence on highlighting the intrinsic correlation between the two sorts of landscapes (par. 8). Thus, neither of these landscapes is superior to the other one, and neither is valid in absence of the other. In this way, when any of these landscapes works without the other, disaster appears, just like when Adrian decides to love Evadne with all his inner soul, forgetting about the external landscape:

The universe was to him a dwelling, to inhabit with his chosen one; and not either a scheme of society or an enchainment of events, that could impart to him either happiness or misery. What, though life and the system of social intercourse were a wilderness, a tiger-haunted jungle! Through the midst of its errors, in the depths of its savage recesses, there was a disentangled and flowery pathway, through which they might journey in safety and delight. (Shelley, *The Last Man* 25)

To Adrian, the external world has turned into a "tiger-haunted jungle," whereas the internal world remains a "flowery pathway" for him. As a result, the events in the life of this character do not unfold as he wishes.

In the case of the character of Raymond, it seems that although he feels a catastrophic imbalance between his internal landscape and the external landscape that surrounds him, Raymond might be the only character who actually acknowledges the differentiation between these two types and the need of their correlation when he says to Lionel: "You, who fancy that you can read the human soul, as your native lake reads each crevice and folding of its surrounding hills" (Shelley, *The Last Man* 49). Interestingly, M.

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<sup>7</sup> The fact that Mary Shelley employed such a large variety of metaphors related to ships has been understood as a way of making reference to her husband's tragic death.

Shelley offers, in the voice of Raymond, an analysis of the correlation between these two landscapes:

Philosophers have called man a microcosm of nature, and find a reflection in the internal mind for all this machinery visibly at work around us (...) What a sea is the tide of passion, whose fountains are in our own nature! Our virtues are the quick-sands, which shew themselves at calm and low water; but let the waves arise and the winds buffet them, and the poor devil whose hope was in their durability, finds them sink from under him. The fashions of the world, its exigencies, educations and pursuits, are winds to drive our wills, like clouds all one way; but let a thunderstorm arise in the shape of love, hate, or ambition, and the rack goes backward, stemming the opposing air in triumph. (Shelley, *The Last Man* 51)

Thus, it becomes clear that the author is establishing a connection between man and Nature, and how humans' internal world (or landscape) and mode of operating depends greatly on the Natural elements that surround us.

### 3.5. The Feminist Use of Nature

As the daughter of the greatest advocate of women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley's works have usually been analyzed under a feminist perspective. In this way, some passages of *The Last Man* include some gender and Nature relations. Most of these relations denote the female subordination to men, and they are frequently portrayed through Nature. For instance, Nature itself is often addressed to as a female element by using the feminine pronouns. Nevertheless, it —or rather, she— is defined as being the minister of man: “that man's mind alone was the creator of all that was good or great to man, and that Nature herself was only his first minister” (Shelley, *The Last Man* 5). In the same way, the Earth is considered female, but *she* is again “subdued to fertility by their [countrymen's] labours” (Shelley, *The Last Man* 5). The Earth's orb is also acknowledged to be female, but she is totally disregarded by Verney, who actually claims that “the rest of her orb was as a fable, to have forgotten which would have cost neither my imagination nor understanding an effort” (Shelley, *The Last Man* 5). Similarly, England is feminized and unfairly compared to “a vast and well-manned ship” (Shelley, *The Last Man* 5).

Apart from denoting the subordination of women to men, Nature is also employed as a metaphor to show how phallogocentric society is. In this way, Mary Shelley uses

completely different natural elements to describe women and men. In the case of the former group, the author opted for words related to germination to describe the character of Perdita: “She was like a fruitful soil that imbibed the airs and dews of heaven, and gave them forth again to light in loveliest forms of fruits and flowers” (Shelley, *The Last Man* 11). In contrast to this perspective, male characters are often associated with phallic-life natural elements. In the case of Verney, he is often described by using phallic metaphors that usually make reference to high and strong trees: “I stood on the brink of manhood; passions, strong as the trees of a forest, had already taken root within me” (Shelley, *The Last Man* 13). Thus, the fact that women are described as both soil and fruit evidences that they were regarded as mere means of reproduction. On the other hand, men are portrayed as erected trees, what denotes power and supremacy. There is a passage in the text in which Verney is at Westminster Abbey in London and he claims: “I could trust that he who built up the mountains, planted the forests, and poured out the rivers, would erect another state for lost humanity, where we might awaken again to our affections, our happiness, and our faith” (Shelley, *The Last Man* 226). In this way, Verney’s petition is the restauration of high mountains and trees that would erect again the state of humanity.



## CONCLUSION

After analyzing the different natural elements employed during the Romantic period, and those included in Mary Shelley's novels, *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, the thesis I established in the introduction has been confirmed: M. Shelley uses Nature as a rhetorical multifunctional device in these novels for a variety of purposes.

A recurrent device in Mary Shelley's writing is the use of the sublime in Burkean terms. In the novels at issue, *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*, the sublime does not function exactly for the same purposes, but they share some similarities in this respect. In the former novel, the sublime is mainly used to differentiate between both the characters of Victor and the creature on the one hand, and Victor and Clerval on the other. In *The Last Man*, the sublime is also employed to illustrate the difference between characters, especially Raymond and Adrian. Thus, it becomes clear that M. Shelley was employing Burke's differentiation consciously to oppose the dissimilar personalities of the main characters. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that some of the additional passages that M. Shelley included in the 1831 version of *Frankenstein* maintain this use of the two categories, and thus decided to add new information to refer to the character of Clerval following this line.

Apart from these similarities, both novels differ in the use of the sublime and the beautiful. In this respect, although in *Frankenstein* the creature experiences a change of taste from beautiful landscapes to sublime Nature, there is not a general transition between these two aesthetic perspectives. Nevertheless, the second novel's development is especially appreciable in the clear evolution from the beautiful to the sublime. Interestingly, this change corresponds with the appearance of the tragic events in the story. This is not by chance, but rather it is the actual author's intention of differentiating and opposing the sublime and the beautiful in the development of the plot.

Nevertheless, although the two novels share some basic traits in relation to the sublime, included some biographical events around the time of their respective compositions, they also differ in some aspects. For instance, the most salient source of the sublime in *The Last Man* appears in the form of the plague. It is an element that not only evokes terror, but its effects make the characters aware of their own imminent deaths, thus surpassing the mere evocation without danger characteristic of the traditional use of



the sublime in Burkean terms. Besides, the plague is presented as an invincible and ethereal enemy, impossible to beat. Unquestionably, this type of sublime element is not found in *Frankenstein*, and it is what makes *The Last Man* an unparalleled masterpiece in the use of this rhetorical device since it provides a significant advancement in aesthetic terms.

A distinctive purpose of Nature employed in *Frankenstein* that is nearly absent in *The Last Man* is the use of Nature as a healing entity. Following the Wordsworthian tradition, for the main characters of *Frankenstein*, Nature has curative powers, moral and physical, especially for the main character and, to a lower degree, for the character of the creature, who finds consolation in Nature as well, although that occurs only before feeling rejected by human beings. On the contrary, this employment of Nature does not appear in *The Last Man*. As discussed above, probably the author's personal circumstances, which were indeed hideous, may be a likely explanation for it. M. Shelley's probable need to project her misfortunes led her to deprive the natural elements of their healing properties according to the romantic tradition.

In relation to the various types of natural elements appearing in the two novels, both works share some similar characteristics but at the same time some differences are also spotted. Both texts are alike in the utilization of the iconic Mont Blanc and the glaciers. Thus, in these novels Mont Blanc plays a central role in the development of the plot. In *Frankenstein*, this mountain serves as both a means of denoting Nature's majesty and of its unsurpassable limits. In *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley also employs Mont Blanc as a meaningful device, for a different purpose though. In this text, the Mont Blanc—and Mont Anvert—are used to portray desolation and despair. Similarly, glaciers are also present in this novel to represent anguish and sorrow. Although glaciers are also utilized in *Frankenstein*, they accomplish a slightly dissimilar purpose. Influenced by Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, the icy landscape of this novel appears at both the beginning and the end of the story. Thus, it could be argued that the glaciers in *Frankenstein* fulfill a stylistic function in structural terms. Nevertheless, M. Shelley's description of these icy mountains at the end of the novel differs greatly from how they are portrayed at the beginning. In accordance to the tragic ending of the story, the connotation attached to the glaciers in the last pages of the novel is purely gloomy, bleak and dismal. The author explicitly states in her journals that for her, glaciers and snow-clad mountains offer the

greatest sense of desolation. Therefore, the fact that M. Shelley included these natural elements in the two novels shows that she actually aimed at denoting a feeling of solitude and bleakness with them.

Moreover, both novels differentiate between internal and external landscapes, but this variation is more prominent in *The Last Man*. Thus, M. Shelley is making the close relationship existing between Nature and human beings clearer in her later work. Again, this aspect shows the author's knowledge on how Nature can actually function. By differentiating between internal and external landscapes, it becomes obvious that M. Shelley's employment of Nature was not arbitrary.

Other natural elements, such as rivers and storms, are more prominent in *Frankenstein*, often to perform a rhetorical function to enhance the atmosphere created, just like music does in cinema. Nonetheless, this rhetorical use of Nature is not found in *The Last Man*.

Another point in common between *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* is the feminization of Nature. In the former novel, those natural elements related to the beautiful appear as female, whereas the sublime natural elements appear as masculine. Similarly, in *The Last Man* Nature acts as female, and it is presented as inferior to man, but the author's feminist horizon is made even more conspicuous since Nature is also employed to express how phallogocentric language can be. In this respect, Nature appears in the form of trunks and wood sticks when referring to the male characters. On the other hand, the female characters are associated with natural elements dealing with germination. This feminization of Nature is further emphasized in the 1831 version of *Frankenstein*. Thus, the feminist legacy of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, is clearly visible in her two novels.

Although both novels have some aspects in common, *The Last Man* contains some particular natural elements that makes it particularly remarkable. The plague corresponds directly to the theory of space, which differentiates between space and place. In this way, the plague's terrible effects turn significant spaces into meaningless places since the characters are no longer safe there. In addition, the plague adds a further nuance to the terror aesthetics of the sublime by turning danger from an illusory to an actual fact.

Finally, the plague functions as a means for denoting the author's unstable emotional and social situation.

Although one of the most prominent traits of the Romantic period attending to Nature is that it was perceived from a pantheistic perspective as a superior transcendent entity, this characteristic is nearly absent in both *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*. Strikingly, M. Shelley's closer influences —P.B. Shelley and William Wordsworth— are considered to be the greatest forerunners of this tendency. Nevertheless, M. Shelley opted for a more conservative stand by not including this trend in her novels.

Regarding the ecocritical approach, *The Last Man* presents an ecological apocalypse which provokes the haunting disappearance of the human race. From an ecocritical perspective, this can be regarded as Mary Shelley's concern about the mismanagement of natural resources and as a plea for reconsidering the importance of Nature and knowledge. Hence, she is not just tackling Nature as an aesthetic technique, but M. Shelley is actually acting as a visionary. It could be argued that she is aiming at raising awareness of the Earth's finite duration and resources. Although there is also an ecocritical approach to *Frankenstein*, its usage of natural elements from an ecocritical perspective works at a lower degree, as a means of cautioning the readers to respect the established natural order and to be aware of the supreme power of Nature.

After this analysis, it becomes clear that the way in which Nature is employed in both novels corresponds with the Gothic tradition of M. Shelley's times, but with significant differences. Besides, my initial hypothesis that Nature was employed rhetorically by the author is reasserted. Remarkably, although the two novels share some basic traits, some of the ways in which Nature is employed in *Frankenstein* are absent in *The Last Man*. Coinciding with the author's dramatic emotional situation, M. Shelley's apocalyptic novel presents a more gloomy and horrid use of the natural elements than her former work. For this reason, Nature in *The Last Man*, especially the glaciers and the plague, are more focused on portraying the character's dreadful destiny with a strong ecocritical bias, even in the use of such a central Romantic device as the sublime. Thus, although Nature maintains its rhetoric functionality, it seems that the literary use given to natural elements goes in a more modern direction in this novel. With the analysis carried out in this dissertation, it can be asserted that the evolution carried out in *Frankenstein* in

terms of the Gothic tradition acquires a new dimension in *The Last Man* as other aspects, such as the ecocritical and gender issues, also do, thus confirming her author as one of the groundbreaking novelists of the Romantic period.

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