



# *English Studies in Latin America*

## **Prelinguistic and Linguistic Dimensions in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein***

**Author:** Camila Gutiérrez

**Source:** *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 2 (November 2011)

**ISSN:** 0719-0921

**Published by:** Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

---

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Your use of this work indicates your acceptance of these terms.





## Prelinguistic and Linguistic Dimensions in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Camila Gutiérrez<sup>1</sup>

The present paper analyzes the building of identity and consciousness of the wretch in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. First, it provides an analysis of the prelinguistic stage the wretch goes through in light of Ernst Cassirer's theory on animal reactions and human responses. Here, the concept of "symbol" plays a central role, since it is what triggers the wretch's emotional development. Secondly, the paper presents a series of Jaques Lacan's concepts on the symbolic such as *symbolic order*, *Mirror Stage* and the *Other*, in order to illustrate how the wretch attempts to become more human as its linguistic competence improves. Through the analysis of the process of language acquisition, the wretch's emotional development will be traced in order to see how his initial sympathetic kindness turns into disappointment and brutal desire for revenge.

KEYWORDS: FRANKENSTEIN, IDENTITY, PRELINGUISTIC, ERNST CASSIER, JAQUES LACAN.

Shelley's novel has been widely praised for the way the linguistic acquisition was given a central role in the development of the wretch's personality. The novel, far from simply being a horror story, gives space to the evolution of a monstrous creature into a human-like being that understands the complexity of the human world yet fails to find a place in it. By linking the wretch's ability to communicate to its desire of belonging to a symbolic order, Shelley puts the focus of attention in the monster's linguistic competence and the building of identity through language. The symbolic order, a term introduced by the French psychoanalyst Jaques Lacan, can be understood as an endless web of signifiers, signifieds and associations that determine the order of a subject and make it a social being. It is also associated with language, with words that make the psyche accessible to others (Lobos n.p). Frankenstein's wretch manages to acknowledge the existence of such order thanks to

---

<sup>1</sup> Camila Gutiérrez is a senior student of the English Literature and Linguistics Program at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. She has been Teachers' Assistant for English Language courses and has moderated colloquiums for English practice in her faculty.

language. However, the character exists, breathes and moves long before it is able to give a logical organization to its own thoughts, hence the importance of the consideration of the pre linguistic stage. Without it, the consciousness and identity of the wretch are incomplete. Both the linguistic and pre linguistic stages define him, in contrast to the case of the normal human being whose pre linguistic life is nothing else but a preparatory period for the later to be build linguistic identity and consciousness.

The German philosopher Ernst Cassirer explains two forms of communication in the animal world: the sign and the symbol. Understanding language as constituted of a variety of “geological layers”, Cassirer restricts the use of signs to the emotional layer and of the symbol to the propositional layer. According to him, the non-symbolic animal completes its functional circle, the process between the receptor and ejector systems, by using the sign. Cassirer explains that biological species receive external stimuli through the receptor system and create responses through the ejector one (46). The sign, in between the two, is highly charged with emotional meaning and enables the living being to understand and convey emotion and to experience the world directly (53-54).

Frankenstein’s wretch is trapped in the sign stage for a long period before it realizes that language makes a difference in the experience of the world. When telling Victor about its early days and how it survived and got to meet the De Lacey family, the wretch begins its tale by describing the impressions of perception. Its first encounters with the outer world are chaotic, and the wretch hardly discerns the bug from the leave, the day from the night. However, its narrative is from beginning to end full of references to emotional reactions. The chaos of perception confused and pained the wretch, and as a reaction it wept: “I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept” (Shelley 98).

The wretch’s emotions are the first reactions we know of after the ones caused by biological needs such as hunger. “In my joy I thrust my hand into the live embers ... and to my joy found it composed of wood” (Shelley 100). The wretch feels miserable, joyous, cries and recognizes melancholy and happiness in the faces of the De Lacey family. Emotional meaning is the first it learns to decode, and to assimilate. Though the wretch is unable to understand symbolic propositional language, the emotions that flow through him establish the first relationship with the living beings that surround him. This first relationship, of compassion and

solidarity, changes the priority of his needs. Although he is hungry, he keeps himself from eating the De Laceys' food, and even though he has been harmed by human beings, he spends time collecting wood for the family. Kindness and compassion define the first traces of his personality, at a point in which symbolic language is still alien to him and the notion of consciousness is barely emerging.

Lacan's *Mirror Stage* can somehow explain the wretch's evolution so far. One can compare the wretch's self-discovery to the self-discovery of the infant that stumbles upon a mirror and is faced with a sudden image of himself as whole. This discovery contrasts with what he (the child, or the wretch in our case) had previously experienced as a fragmented entity. For Lacan, the discovery of that complete entity begins a process of identification between the internal "I" and the external image in the mirror, giving origin to the child's "ego" (Lobos n.p.). Similarly, the monster's early days consist mostly of a process of habituation to its body and senses. Like the child that has not discovered his body as a whole yet, the wretch's body is perceived as fragmented, awkward, troublesome and chaotic: "Darkness then came over me and troubled me, but hardly had I felt this when, opening my eyes, as I know suppose, the light poured in upon me again. I walked and, I believe, descended, but I presently found a great alteration in my sensations" (Shelley 98). The wretch's sensations and perception of the world consists only of the exterior. Later, with the encounter of others whose symbolic order it cannot understand nor become part of, its emotions begin to connect it with the beings of the exterior world, but its self-identification is still in progress. The discovery of his own being and the awkwardness of his fragmented body become evident at first in his failure when trying to imitate the singing of birds: "Sometimes I tried to imitate the pleasant songs of the birds but was unable" (Shelley 99) and then when trying to express himself, when he is frightened by his own voice: "Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which *broke from me frightened* me into silence again." (Emphasis added, 99)

Later, when entering the shepherd's cabin, he notices the man's attention is drawn upon him, and that his appearance is different from anything he had seen before, (Shelley 101) this being the first encounter with a human being that the wretch remembers. Interestingly, the encounter with Victor is not included in the wretch's narration, for at the moment it happens, the wretch's memory

does not seem to be able to store any perceived impressions. Therefore, the first Other<sup>2</sup> he meets is the shepherd, and the first living beings with whom he connects emotionally are the De Lacey family. These relations determine the wretch's evolution into the symbolic language as they give him the notion of being different from others although he is able to connect with them. His existence evolves from the chaotic stream of impressions to the identification of his own fragmented body and finally to the establishment of emotional relations with Others.

Up to this point, no symbolic language has been witnessed nor understood by the wretch, but his personality and identification of the self have become more or less evident. Then, when the symbolic propositional language is discovered and the wretch is aware of its importance, the way in which he perceives the world changes completely.

The perception and the responses of the wretch change once language is acquired. After realizing the cottagers had a system that facilitated communication through sounds and signs, thus recognizing the existence of a symbolic language, he sees his reflection in a transparent pool and understands that the order of language and communication of the cottagers is inevitably alien to him. The following lines illustrate the understanding of the need of using the symbolic language in order to enter what Lacan would call the symbolic order: “[A]lthough I eagerly longed to discover myself to the cottagers, I ought not to make the attempt until I had first become master of their language.” Then, he tells about the realization of his different nature, of the final acquisition of a complete notion of self: “I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers ... but how was I terrified when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! ... and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification” (Shelley 109).

The pool works as the mirror, which, as Amanda Lobos explains, should give the human (the wretch in our case study) a place in the world, in which as complete subject it/he/she makes sense as a complete subject. Therefore, the act of looking into the mirror “becomes a process of identification of internal self with that external image. The mirror stage thus represents the infant's [or the wretch's] first encounter with subjectivity, with spatial relations, with an external sense of coherence, and with a sense of ‘I’ and ‘You’” (n.p). The wretch manages to complete the mirror

---

<sup>2</sup> The capitalized word refers to Lacan's “Other”, which stands for a being that the subject recognizes as other than himself and to which he relates through a social link. For Lobos, an example of Other is the woman who complements the man yet differs from him at the same time.

stage and gives coherence to the world in the sense that he acknowledges that he does not belong to the order, for he is a monstrous creature.

Parallel to the process of acquisition of symbolic language, the notion of self develops more, and the mental activity of the wretch that at first was all puzzlement and chaos now creates the desire of understanding more deeply the order he has come across. The learning of new words is followed by the lines: “My *thoughts* now became more active, and I longed to discover the motives and feelings of these lovely creatures; I was inquisitive to know *why* Felix appeared so miserable...” (Emphases added, Shelley 110) At this point in the wretch’s narration, he explains he was now aware of the fact that he could think and that he wished to know reasons, apart from learning new words. Emotions, therefore, evolve from being merely perceived to have a meaning behind them, a reason. The symbolic system is put to work in the wretch’s mind, and “[b]etween the receptor and the ejector systems, which are found in all animal species, we find as an intermediary link something we can call ‘symbolic system’” (Cassirer 47).<sup>3</sup> The response to the perceived emotions is delayed by a complex thinking process that attempts to give meaning to the emotional language; the symbolic system. This differentiates him from the animal, whose primitive way of thinking does not allow it to think “about” things but to think the things themselves (Cassirer 58).

Furthermore, the wretch’s comprehension of the symbolic language and recognition of the symbolic order, lead him to think for the first time about linear time in the form of past, present and future: “[T]he past was blotted from my memory, the present was tranquil, and the future gilded by bright rays of hope and anticipations of joy” (Shelley 111); an order of thoughts that contrasts significantly with the introductory lines of his narration: “It is with considerable difficulty that I remember the original era of my being; all the events of that period appear confused and indistinct” (Shelley 98).

After the recognition of the symbolic language and order, and the organization of the inner and outer realms of existence in the wretch’s mind, the narrative moves into the failure of the wretch’s attempts of inclusion into the symbolic order. Peter Brooks refers to this by saying that “the use of language has failed to gain his entry into the chain of existence and events” (596) and by

---

<sup>3</sup> Original quote: Entre el sistema receptor y el efector, que se encuentran en todas las especies animales, hallamos como eslabón intermedio algo que podemos señalar como ‘sistema simbólico’

concluding that “[t]he Monster’s failure –what establishes irremediably *as* monster- is his inability, despite his eloquence, to find relation” (602).

However, his failure to achieve being included into what Brooks calls a “chain of existence and events” (598) should not be equated to an inability to find relation. The wretch does find relation, first at an emotional level, and later in a linguistic level. Though for Brooks the reason why the wretch remains precultural (600) is that he is unable to create a strong link with the signifying chain, the simple act of narrating his own story establishes the missing relation. The wretch that tells his own story makes a revision of his past and provides it with a logical order and filling it with meaning, just as the author of an autobiography “looks at himself being and ... calls himself as witness for himself; others he calls as witness for what is irreplaceable in his presence” (Gusdorf 29). The monster’s narration creates the relation between himself and Victor, for both become witnesses of the wretch’s completion of the building of his self. His narration “is one of the means to self knowledge thanks to the fact that it recomposes and interprets [his] life in its totality” (Gusdorf 38), and instead of simply juxtaposing a series of memories, connects them through the realms of emotion and language.

The wretch’s story, presented as a monologue within a story (either Victor’s story and/or Walton’s story), assumes the task of reconstructing his life across time, and providing his existence with justification, although he is clearly outside of the chain of existence. In order to do so, the wretch recollects memories and impressions, emotions and thoughts and weaves them all together in the shape of a narration with the purpose of self-justification. “This lived unity of attitude and act is not received from the outside; certainly events influence us; they sometimes determine us, and they always limit us. But the essential themes, the structural designs that impose themselves on the complex material of exterior facts, are the constituent elements of the personality” (Gusdorf 37). As Georges Gusdorf explains, the essential themes are the ones that constitute the personality, and they determine the way in which reality is processed by the mind. The wretch’s personality emerges from the early days of its existence in the forms of sympathetic kindness and desire for recognition, which become the motif of his linguistic acquisition and later revenge. The linguistic and prelinguistic stages are thus given a special importance in the narration for they constitute the essence of the wretch and provide him with a complete, human-like notion of self. Although regarded as a threat to the natural order, the wretch consciously and willingly prepares himself for the world he is about to face and goes through stages of the development of human consciousness so successfully that its

monstrosity could even be questioned. Its linguistic competence and consciousness evolution are so successfully treated by Shelley that, until now, the wretch's humanity can be studied through psychoanalysts, philosophers and literary academics' views on what human consciousness and identity are and what they are not.

### Works Cited

- Brooks, Peter. "Godlike Science/Unhallowed Arts: Language and Monstrosity in Frankenstein." *New Literary History* 9.3 (1978): 591-605. *Jstor*. Web. 28 June 2011.
- Cassirer, Ernst. "De Las Reacciones Animales a Las Respuestas Humanas." *Antropología Filosófica*. México: Fondo De Cultura Económica, 1967. 50-70. Print.
- Gusdorf, Georges, "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography", in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. And trans. James Olney, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980, 28-48. Print.
- Lobos, Amanda. "Symbolic, Real, Imaginary." *Keywords Glossary*. University of Chicago, Winter 2002. Web. 27 June 2011.
- Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein*. London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994. Print.