Reading and Responding: Literature, Ethics and Citizenship

Martha Nussbaum's argument that literature cultivates "powers of imagination that are essential to citizenship" centres on literature as a vehicle for empathy and, in turn, social action. Yet Suzanne Keen suggests that "a society that insists on receiving immediate ethical and political yields from the recreational reading of its citizens puts too great a burden on both empathy and the novel" (168). While Nussbaum and Keen offer differing positions on the social role of literature, both focus on its ethical function, suggesting reading should affect readers' sense of responsibility to others in society. As Geoffrey Galt Harpham describes, "Ethics is the arena in which the claims of otherness - the moral law, the human other, cultural norms, the Good-in-itself etc. - are articulated and negotiated" (394). This paper will offer a reading of Mary Shelley as a Foucauldian founder of discourse. In doing so, I argue that Shelley established a new way for readers to navigate ethical questions: *Frankenstein* results in the reader responding to "the claims of otherness" precisely because Shelley does not provide them with a response - she leaves it to the reader to decide which ethical consideration takes primacy. She "articulates" but allows the reader to "negotiate". It is this new discourse, most often articulated through the genre of science fiction which explores "who we are and might be" (Nussbaum, 106), that results not only in an empathetic response but an ethical one. Literature, and particularly the unanswered 'what if?' of science fiction as popularised by Shelley, provides readers the space to engage with the ethical demands of their citizenry through their readership.

Keen summarises the position taken by Nussbaum and others who share her view that fiction has an ethical, social imperative. "These theorists emphasize the moral renovation of the reader through the very experience of novel reading. They argue that the process of identifying with a fictional character leads to a revised view of other real human beings" (Keen, 25). While this may be true for many readers, a "revised view" does not necessarily entail changes in the reader's real life conduct. Nussbaum's desire to see changes in action is perhaps too lofty a goal, as Keen suggests

> the perception of fictionality releases novel-readers from the normal state of alert suspicion of others' motives that often acts as a barrier to empathy. This means that the contract of fictionality offers a no strings-attached opportunity for emotional transactions of great intensity. A novel-reader may enjoy empathy freely without paying society back in altruism. (Keen 167)

Keen's suggestion that empathy does not entail action is borne out by even the most superficial survey of contemporary culture. If what Nussbaum advocates was true, there would be no disproportionate representation of African-Americans in the American justice system, precisely as a result of the widespread reading of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in American schools[1]. The empathy many readers feel for the clearly innocent Tom Robinson should mean that Americans are thorough and discerning in the prosecution of African-Americans, because the novel and Tom's death at the hands of his guards show us the suffering caused by false imprisonment and racism. Yet this is not the case, and movements like Black Lives Matter continue to agitate for greater social change to negate the racism that underpins some sections of the American justice system. Nussbaum herself acknowledges that "sympathy inspired by literary imagining does not immediately effect political change" (97). The example of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (which I acknowledge does not take into account the many historical and socio-political factors that also contribute to the disproportionate representation of jailed African-Americans) suggests that it perhaps does not effect change even in the long term. Is this a failure on the part of the novel? Did it not evoke sufficient empathy in its readers to change their view about racism? What if the reader empathised with the racist views of Bob Ewell? Clearly, if changing culture was simply a case of developing a suitable list of required reading, we would not be at this conference today.

[1] African-Americans make up approximately 13% of the total population of the United States(Census 3) but 35% of jail inmates are African-American (Dept Justice 1).

I argue that tangible social outcomes are not the most likely outcome of empathetic reading. Reading is an inherently personal and individual pursuit. Even if we share and discuss what we have read, each reader has formed their own responses. These responses may align with their peers, because as Stanley Fish suggests there are only so many ways things can be written.

> Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In other words these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around. (Fish 483).

So while no two readers will read exactly the same way, the scope of their reading is limited to a degree by the forces that restrict what the author can have said (and how they said it) in the first place. Fish's argument is akin to Foucault's construction of discourse "whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation"* (Foucault, *Archaeology,* 38).

I argue that Shelley founded a new discourse because she established a new way of saying things about science. To return to Fish, Shelley changed the shape of what could be read by developing new strategies for writing a new type of text. By addressing real concerns about real science <u>through</u> fiction Shelley opened a new discursive space, allowing both writers and readers to say new things about science in a new way. This new formation is the nascent genre of science fiction.

I believe the work of <u>fiction</u> here is of fundamental importance: fiction provides a 'safe' space for readers as it places no demands upon them in the real world. As Keen points out,

> readers' perception of a text's fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self protection through skepticism and suspicion .

> David Miall has noticed a similar effect. The fiction reader who suspends disbelief, Miall argues, encounters devices that vouch for a novel's fictionality and that are "capable of eliciting the decentering response of empathic projection" ( Keen, 88)

A reader's knowledge of the novel as fiction allows them the freedom to engage imaginatively in both emotive and ethical responses. For example, Nabokov's *Lolita* creates a seemingly sympathetic portrayal of paedophilia. While almost all readers would condemn Humbert if they encountered him in reality, they nonetheless immerse themselves in a narrative about his motivations and desires. It is not wrong to feel a degree of sympathy for Humbert as it is only fiction, after all: yet we nonetheless resist as our own moral code cannot condone the sympathy evoked by Nabokov's ironic representation of Humbert's actions as acceptable.

While this may sound like an argument for fiction as having no social impact or purpose, I in fact want to argue for a middle ground between Nussbaum and Keen. Keen argues that popular fiction is even less likely to result in social change,

> When a novel becomes a popular bestseller, I have suggested, the psychological effect of diffusion of responsibility may deter readers from acting upon their empathetic reading. The link between feeling with fictional characters and acting on behalf of real people, I have argued, is extremely tenuous and has yet to be substantiated either through empirical research into the effects of reading or through analysis of demonstrable causal relationships between novel reading as a cultural phenomenon and historical changes in societies in which novel reading flourishes (Keen 146).

While I do not think it is not the goal of fiction to achieve broad, tangible social reform as Nussbaum suggests, I do not agree with Keen's assertion that popular fiction cannot have a social impact. What some forms of fiction do is provide a safe space for readers to form individual, perhaps empathetic, but certainly ethical, responses. This is in fact where the power of science fiction truly lies – in giving the reader the imaginative space to explore possibilities without didactically proposing a solution or

demanding an action. It is here that the value of readers and reading, both recreationally and critically, becomes evident.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is clearly fiction, with many Gothic overtones. When first published in 1818, no author was given, positioning Walton as the authorial voice within the work. The creature's composite parts, collected from "vaults and charnel houses" (1818, 31) inspired thoughts of Gothic family tombs rather than a scientific endeavour. Yet as one critic of the time observed, "There never was a wilder story imagined, yet, like most fictions of this age, it has an air of reality attached to it, by being connected with the favourite projects and passions of the times" (Edinburgh Magazine 238). This 'air of reality' is the hook of Shelley's 'what if' question. The yet-to-be-debunked science of galvanism had been seen to cause movement and facial reactions in corpses and it is on this real life experience that Shelley bases her fictional work. It is this 'what if' premise that is one of the key features of all genres of speculative fiction. Unlike other genres of fiction that portray social realities, science fiction offers a glimpse of social possibilities, leaving it to the reader to decide if that is a world in which they could live.

In the case of *Frankenstein,* the 'what if" man could give life? premise is the generic device that allows the narrative to proceed. Shelley's ambiguous ending is where we can begin to see the discursive space opened to readers to draw their own moral and ethical boundaries. At the centre of the novel, the Creature recounts his moral and social development and it becomes evident that Victor's wrongdoing was not the act of creation, so much as his lack of care for the Creature during its formative period. "Remember that I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam, but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed". The Creature's criticism of Victor is not based on giving him life, but on Victor's neglect. In the closing of the novel, as Walton turns south, abandoning his quest for the mythical north-west passage, Victor and the Creature are reunited. Victor, even as he dies, does not see what he has done as wrong, even asking Walton to continue his work.

> During these last days I have been occupied in examining my past conduct; nor do I find it blameable. In a fit of enthusiastic madness I created a rational creature, and was bound towards him, to assure, as far as was in my power, his happiness and well-being. This was my duty; but there was another still paramount to that. My duties towards my fellow-creatures had greater claims to my attention, because they included a greater proportion of happiness or misery. Urged by this view, I refused, and I did right in refusing to create a companion for the first creature… I asked you to undertake my unfinished work; and I renew this request now, when I am only induced by reason and virtue (1818, 156)

This passage highlights the many ethical positions that may be adopted in response to Victor's actions. Victor sees his obligation to the wellbeing of society as being above the wellbeing of the Creature. Yet as Keen points out, "empathy for a fictional character need not correspond with what the author appears to set up or invite … Self-reported readers' empathy appears to be unpredictable and sporadic" (75). Shelley cannot have predicted if the reader would respond to Victor's search for knowledge in a positive or negative, way or if they in fact empathised with the Creature, or Walton, or another figure in the novel. The reader may feel greater empathy for the Creature, and so view Victor as having failed his duty to his creation. These differing responses are further enabled because Shelley as author provides no guidance – she does not condemn Victor or the Creature. The uncertainty of the ending is reinforced as we do not see the Creature perish: as Walton sails away, he is "lost in darkness and distance".

The potential survival of the Creature and the lack of clear lesson in Victor's story opens a space for the reader's response to take primacy over any intended authorial meaning. As Wolfgang Iser established, "the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified with either the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader" (Iser, 277). Because the ending is not clear cut, there is greater scope for the disposition of the reader to play a

larger role in meaning-making, as the reality of the text does not provide a definitive ending. This "essential ambiguity" (Hitchcock 226) is what establishes a space for moralising or ethical thinking. Unlike the didactic lessons given in other nineteenth century novels, such as Eliott's and the Bronte's exhortations on good social conduct, which teach the reader what the world *should* be like, Shelley work shows the reader one potential view of what the world *might* be like, if we allow the 'what if?' to become a 'when I'. The *lack* of ethical guidance given by Shelley creates a vacuum that the reader must fill with their own conclusions. There are those readers that, as Shelley encourages in the more conservative 1831 edition of the novel, "deduce an apt moral from my tale" and condemn Victor, the Modern Prometheus, for attempting to usurp the creative powers of God. Others see it as a warning not against scientific experiment, but a lesson in the responsibility that must accompany this (ref cloning paper). Criticism reveals yet more possible responses, for example Montwieler and Boren argue that Victor's actions are a warning against the Romantic ego and the dangers of genius working in isolation. For them, the creature reveals that "although solitude is necessary for intellectual and creative development, the survival and emotional health of the self depends, however, not on distancing oneself from others, but through inter-subjectivity, if not community" (Montwieler and Boren, 3). Yet others see it as nothing more than an amusing diversion, so irrelevant to the real world it has no bearing upon their life after they finish the novel.

This multitude of responses is so broad because of Shelley's ambiguous ending. She poses the question 'what if man could give life?' but leaves the ultimate judgement of the ethics of Victor's creation and subsequent behaviour to the reader. This stands in contrast to other nineteenth century works like Dickens's *Oliver Twist,* which is uncompromising in its condemnation of the abuses of the 1834 Poor Law. There is no ambiguity in Dickens's meaning as he condemns those who have created the system of workhouses, whereas Shelley does not condemn either the creator or the created. In so doing, she establishes a space where literature can act as a locus point for ethics and science – a space

where we can think about, and make decisions about the potential consequences of new scientific knowledge in a safe way, without necessarily having to take action, as Nussbaum suggests.

Speculative fiction asks 'what if…?' and I think great works in this genre leave it up to the reader to make their own decisions. In this way, fiction reading does shape culture, at an individual level, as each reader, in their response, draws a new boundary for themselves – Victor is to be condemned, celebrated for his endeavour, chastised for his lack of care for his Creature… and so the reader may respond similarly when science does pose the same question in the real world. 'Frankenstein's' entry into the zeitgeist as a warning against playing God or irresponsible science suggests this is the dominant reading of the text. It also turns us back towards Nussbaum's view that fiction can have a social outcome. The dominant view is that Frankenstein's frequent invocation indicates that our culture has recognised the perilous nature of Victor's lack of responsibility and so we have adopted a cautious approach to genetic and biological experimentation. This can be seen in the late twentieth-century debate about the ethics of cloning. For example, "The Frankenstein Controversy: The Constitutionality of a Federal Ban on Cloning" opens with a quotation from the novel and points out that the book:

> … tapped into a societal uneasiness about the proper limits of scientific inquiry. Scientific discoveries do not unfold in a vacuum. They play out against a cultural backdrop in which both fantasy and reality are intertwined. Tampering with the process of creation, whether it be in the form of assisted reproductive technology, genetic testing, or, at its most extreme, cloning, plays on "profound concerns regarding the nature of humankind and its relationship to other aspects of the natural world". (279)

This highlights that the 'what if' of Shelley's novel taps in to real world, and in this way reveals the operating of the discursive space that underpins the genre of science fiction. Readers can respond to the what if with their own personal moral boundaries, safe in the knowledge that it is a fictional

scenario. Yet at the same time, as the premise has an air of reality, readers can also reflect upon their own real world experience, without necessarily having to be moved to action or a change in behaviour.

Overall, I think Nussbaum's argument that literature should serve as an ethical primer is unrealistic and not borne out by evidence. Reader's responses will always vary based upon which character they feel the greatest empathy for and so no consistent 'lesson' can be guaranteed to be learnt. Keen acknowledges the complexity of the relationship between writing, reading and responding.

> That the novel should be singled out as a technology most adept at invoking empathy and shaping moral behaviour challenges what psychologists have been able to discover about empathy, but it endorses what many people believe about the transformative power of reading and of reading fiction in particular. (Keen 35)

I would add to Keen's point that speculative fiction is more likely to provoke ethical responses that come to bear in the real world. The reason for this, as highlighted by this brief study of *Frankenstein*, is that the 'what if…?' of the science fiction genre, coupled with ambiguity in the author's ending, works to create a space for the readers to draw their own boundaries. In the case of *Frankenstein*, the narrative has transcended its readership, with the term becoming a cultural marker for the dangers of unfettered scientific experimentation. While speculative fiction broadly, and the science fiction genre particularly, are often seen a pulp or low brow, the popularity of the genre speaks to its appeal in our time of rapidly developing scientific change, just as was the case in Shelley's time. Shelley helped establish a new way for fiction and reality to interact—an intersection where the reader is offered the security of fiction but the intellectual room to consider the potential realities of the author's what if premise. In this way we can see the act of reading as a rehearsal, rather than an enactment, of citizenry. The reading of fiction does not have to result in social action, but fiction does serve a social function - the safe space for readers to draw their own ethical boundaries within 'what if' scenarios provides a space for thinking about how we would respond to similar changes in our real lives.

# Bibliography


Edinburgh Magazine. 2012. "On Frankenstein (March 1818)." In *Frankenstein*, by J. Paul Hunter, 231-237. New York: WW Norton & Co.

Fish, Stanley. 1976. "Interpreting the Variorum." *Critical Inquiry* 2 (3): 465-485.

Foucault, Michel. 1990. *The Archaeology of Knowledge [1972].* Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith. Routledge.

Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. 1995. "Ethics." In *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, 397-405. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Iser, Wolfgang. 1972. "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *New Literary History* (Johns Hopkins University Press) 3 (2): 279-299. http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/468316.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A4dc1cc93664ddb34e3980d831b5762ff.

Keen, Suzanne. 2007. *Empathy and the Novel.* New York: Oxford Univeristy Press .

Lawton, Anne. 1999. "The Frankenstein Controversy: The Constitutionality of a Federal Ban on Cloning." *Kentucky Law Journal* 87 (2): 277-356. http://digitalcommons.law.msu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1558&context=facpubs.

Montwieler, Katherine, and Mark E Boren. 2012. "The Patholgy of The Romantic Subject and Mary Shelley's Cure for Melancholia in Frankenstein and Matilda." *PsyArt.*

Nussbaum, Martha C. 1997. *Cultivating Humanity.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Shelley, Mary. 1818. *Frankenstein.* 2nd. Edited by Paul J. Hunter. New York: WW Norton and Co.

—. 1831. *Frankenstein.* 2nd. Edited by Johanna M. Smith. Boston: Bedford/StMartin's.