

Confronting Bodily Dismemberment in Mary
Shelley's *Frankenstein* and in Robert Louis
Stevenson's *The Body Snatcher*

Valenti Alessandro

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- The body as a site of social control and class violence, especially in the case of anatomical dissection.
 - The tension between anonymity enforced by dissection and the notion of the corpse as a *container of identity* (in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*) or as a *retainer of identity* (in Robert Louis Stevenson's "The Body Snatcher").
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- The transition to a fully capitalist society and the rise of bourgeois cultural hegemony; the deployment of anatomy as a tool of political oppression.
 - The institutionalisation of medicine and the increasing demand for bodies to be dissected.
 - Popular anxieties about poverty, dissection, and body snatching are conflated into a culturally-embedded stigma against dissection.



William Hogarth, *The Reward of Cruelty* (1751)

A (BRIEF) TIMELINE OF EVENTS

- Murder Act of 1752: dissection of all executed criminals is made compulsory, as a way of inflicting an additional 'mark of Infamy' upon the dead body.
- 1800: The Royal College of Surgeons is created. Body-snatching slowly becomes a commonplace occurrence, as the demand for bodies increases.
- 1818: First edition of *Frankenstein*.
- 1828: the Burke & Hare scandal breaks in Edinburgh.
- The Anatomy Act of 1832: the body trade is regulated. Licensed surgeons receive the bodies of the 'unclaimed dead' who had perished in hospitals, prisons, or workhouses.
- The Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834: utilitarian legislation aimed at reducing the cost of welfare and at creating a more competitive job market. Poverty is effectively criminalised.
- 1884: Stevenson's "The Body Snatcher" is published in the *Pall Mall Gazette*.

A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO DISSECTION AND MONSTROSITY

- Popular hostility to dissection: where Christian burial was a way of preserving personal identity in view of the Resurrection, pauper burials, body-snatching and dissection bore the threat of anonymity in death.
- Secular anxieties generated by capitalism: the working-class body exploited not only in life but also in death. Towards a “capitalist monsterology” of everyday life. (McNally, 2)
- The monster arising from “the terror of a split society, and [from] the desire to heal it.” (Moretti 83).

FRANKENSTEIN

- *Frankenstein* dramatizes the conflict between a perversion of utilitarian ideology and the suffering of those most vulnerable to dissection.
- The Creature as an embodiment of the mob, a “collective and artificial creature” (Moretti 85) that resembles the proletariat.
- Victor Frankenstein’s refusal to recognize his Creature and the bourgeois horror of embodied working-class identity.
- Mary Shelley’s “anxious radical liberalism.” (McNally 107)
- The Creature as a result of decontextualized science, devoted to individualism rather than to the public good. (Rauch)
- The confrontation with the monster and the reversal of class violence.

“THE BODY SNATCHER”

- “The Body Snatcher” as a “crawler” written for a popular readership: the stigma against dissection is embraced by Stevenson and turned against the medical establishment.
- The issue of personal responsibility in a morally reprehensible system.
- The monstrous and alienating commodification of the corpse in the body trade.
- Grey’s ambiguous class identity and the return of the repressed cadaver.
- The narrative is “wormed out” (Stevenson 77) and the process mirrors the operations of the resurrection men.

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