

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

VOLUME I

PREFACE

Many have identified *Frankenstein* as a book of science fiction—indeed, as even the first of that genre in the English language. In the preface, Mary Shelley writes, “The event on which the interest of the story depends ... was recommended by the novelty of the situations which it develops; and, however impossible as a physical fact, affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions” (p. 1). What is she suggesting about the relationship between science fiction and truth? Do you agree with her? Why or why not?

LETTERS

Why has Mary included the letters Captain Walton writes to his sister, Margaret? Do they help you understand the scientific context in which Victor (and Mary) operate? The social context? In what ways is Captain Walton like Victor? In what ways is he different? Do your views of him change from the beginning to the end of the novel?

In the last of the letters, Victor slips into the language of fate and predetermination. In what ways is his future fated, and in what ways is it of his own making? Why is he here using the language of fate?

CHAPTER I

What do we learn about Victor, his family, and his friends from this opening chapter of Mary’s narrative? Would you call Victor’s childhood “Edenic”? What are the implications of identifying it as such?

How did the young Victor approach reading, learning, and science? What kind of things impressed him or failed to impress him?

CHAPTER II

When Victor goes off to the University of Ingolstadt, he has become a “mother-less child,” believing himself “totally unfitted for the company of strangers” (p. 28). How does this view of himself influence the way he approaches his studies? Have you ever felt this way when you have gone off to school or camp or elsewhere? If so, how did it affect the way you approached your tasks?

Have you ever had a teacher accuse you of reading “nonsense,” as M. Krempe does of Victor? If so, how did you react? How is M. Krempe correct or incorrect in his assessment of Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus?

Who might be on the reading lists that M. Krempe and M. Waldman provide Victor (roughly around 1790)? M. Waldman shows Victor the machines in his laboratory. What might those machines have been? What did a laboratory of the late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century look like?

CHAPTER III

How does Victor approach his studies at the University of Ingolstadt? How is this approach different from your approach to your studies? How does Victor choose a mentor? Do you have a mentor? How would your studies be different if your mentoring situation were different?

How does Victor learn about “the principle of life” (p. 33)? In what venues do his inquiries take place? Are his inquiries limited to the laboratory? In what ways does contemporary research span laboratory research and research outside the laboratory?

What biological materials are used in a modern university? What rules govern their use? How did these rules come about? Are rules different for human biological materials and nonhuman materials? Should they be?

Has discovering something about the natural world ever made you unhappy? Has learning something new in any endeavor ever made you unhappy? In either case, did you decide in the end that it was better to know or not to know? What other stories, fact or fiction, can you think of about knowledge causing unhappiness?

Why does Victor choose not to reveal his discovery to anyone or to consult with anyone about his determination to animate a creature based on his discovery? Is it right to keep discoveries secret? Are there examples of discoveries that have been kept secret, at least for a time? Should they have been kept secret?

Have you ever neglected other duties—your friends or family, your other classes, sports or art or entertainment—because of your commitment to a scientific or creative endeavor? How did it feel while you were doing this? How did it feel afterward?

CHAPTER IV

Why is Mary’s description of the laboratory context of the “instruments of life” (p. 41) so vague? Compare this scene to the many film reenactments of it (especially the Edison Studios film in 1910, the Universal Pictures film directed by James Whale in 1931, and the TriStar Pictures film directed by Kenneth Branagh in 1994). How are they different? How are they the same? Do the different media give you different ideas about what the science is like? What the ethics are like?

Does Victor use both human and animal material in making his creature? What is the textual evidence, one way or the other? Does it matter to your understanding of the creature’s status if it has animal as well as human parts? Does it matter to your understanding of contemporary human beings if doctors repair their hearts with valves from pigs or transplant baboon hearts into their chests? What about plastic valves, metal joints, or artificial hearts? What about artificial brains?

Some (feminist) critiques of *Frankenstein* point out that Victor succeeds in creating a motherless creature. Would a female creator have behaved differently toward her creature? Could a woman have done what Victor did in his day? Can a female scientist do what a male scientist can do today? Would a female scientist have made the creature? Do women do different science or do science differently than men?

CHAPTER V

Victor “conceived a violent antipathy even to the name of natural philosophy” (p. 51). Is there any extent to which he might be right in blaming the entire field of study or its overall perspective? Are there fields of inquiry to which you have an “antipathy,” if not a violent one? What is that hostility based on? Is it moral? Is it metaphysical?

Parenthood can be emotionally challenging, as exemplified by the prevalence of post-partum depression among new mothers. Victor also falls ill in the wake of his animation of the creature, and his friend Henry Clerval nurses him back to health. Why in this period, which goes on for many months, does Victor completely ignore the creature’s disappearance? What is his emotional state during this time, and in what ways is he like or unlike a parent?

CHAPTER VI

Upon returning to Geneva following William’s death and seeing his creature there, illuminated by a flash of lightning, Victor states that “[t]he mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact” (p. 58) that the creature was the murderer. Have you ever had such leaps of intuition that you immediately knew they were true, even without evidence or investigation? Is that the kind of understanding you associate with a scientist?

CHAPTER VII

Justine is convicted in a murder trial largely on the basis of circumstantial evidence. She was found in possession of the locket that had been on the murdered boy William and could not provide an alibi. How is the use of knowledge different in the law and in science? Are the stakes different? Should knowledge in law and science be identical? Should justice always be predicated on truth?

Why do you think Elizabeth’s testimony has no influence on the jury?

How does religion influence the creation of knowledge in Justine’s trial? How does it influence Victor’s and Elizabeth’s response to the execution of Justine? Why does Justine confess to a crime she did not commit and does not even understand, whereas Victor refuses to provide evidence about which he is certain?

VOLUME II

CHAPTER I

Victor does not seek forgiveness from those he loves, choosing instead to withdraw further from human society. Are his choices so far forgivable? Why or why not?

CHAPTER II

Why would Mary choose such an awe-filled and sublime environment as the Alpine glacier for the confrontation between Victor and the creature? Is it just dumb luck that both Victor and the creature end up there?

Why does the creature not accept Victor's offer to fight, a fight that the creature would most surely win?

In this chapter, Victor finally expresses some ambivalence and even self-doubt—about the circumstances of William's murder and about his treatment of the creature. Why?

CHAPTER III

How credible do you find the creature's account (or, rather, Walton's account of Frankenstein's account of the creature's account) of his early days and weeks? Do you find it surprising that the creature is such an exacting observer? Why or why not?

Why do the people the creature meets react to him with fear or hostility or both? Is it the same fear with which Frankenstein reacts?

How are the creature's "childhood days" like or unlike Victor's described at the outset of the novel?

CHAPTER IV

What do we learn about the creature from his interaction with the old man and the two young people who live in the cottage? What does the creature learn about himself?

What is the creature's view of spoken language? Of what importance is it for him to say that he "learned *and* applied" (p. 91, emphasis added) specific words? What is the difference between the words he learns and applies quickly and those that are still difficult for him?

How does the creature hope to overcome the "deformity" to which he attributes the inspiration of fear and hostility in the humans he meets? Is this hope reasonable?

CHAPTER V

What is the significance for the creature of Safie's arrival at the cottage? What does her presence mean for his understanding of language? Of emotion?

Again like Victor earlier in the novel, the creature experiences the ambivalence of the acquisition of knowledge—sometimes it is greatly for his benefit, but sometimes it causes pain. How does the creature experience this ambivalence? How does he propose to manage it?

Whereas the earlier chapters—for example, those about Victor's gathering of research materials—remind us more of contemporary biomedical research, the narrative of the later chapters, when the creature starts to find his own voice, is more reminiscent of issues with artificial intelligence. How do you imagine the creature's experience compares with that of a machine that has a dawning consciousness?

CHAPTER VI

Why does the creature think that he has to produce copies of the letters between Safie and Felix in order for Victor to believe him?

What is the purpose of the creature's long digression into the affairs of the De Lacey family and of Safie and her family? What can we learn about Victor and the creature through comparison with these two families' experiences?

CHAPTER VII

Mary has the creature stumble upon *Paradise Lost* (Milton), *Plutarch's Lives*, and *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Goethe). What three poems, histories, or novels (or even songs or other creative works) would you choose to educate a creature created today?

Each of us imagines that we are a singular "I" with a unitary body and mind and genetic makeup. At various times, this imagination comes under assault: Freud opened up the world of the subconscious, fracturing the unitary mind. More contemporary discoveries of the importance of microbiota pose the problem of a fragmented body, even after a long history of replacement of lost limbs with prostheses. Contemporary discoveries of chimerism can fragment our genetic unity. In so many ways, the "I" is really a complex collective. What are the implications of such fragmentation, and what are its consequences for understanding who we are as well for the pursuit of science and technology? Does it provide us with new motivations? Does it result in different kinds of knowledge or different kinds of technologies?

The creature says he read *Paradise Lost* as a "true history." What mistakes do we make when we read fiction as fact? How do we know?

It turns out that Victor did make notes or keep a journal of his experiments, and the creature finds them and reads them, although the reader is never given any details from them. How would these notes differ from the letters exchanged elsewhere in the novel?

If you were designing a creature that you intended to be sentient and sapient, what form or type would you give it? Why? Would it depend on its function? Would you take into account its feelings, if any, regarding how it looks, or would you take into account the feelings of the people among whom it would live and work?

The creature refers to his designed encounter with the elder De Lacey as a "trial." How is this trial like or not like the other trials in the novel—for instance, those of Justine and Victor?

CHAPTER VIII

When the creature arrives in Geneva and meets William, the child's identity is unknown to him, and he does not have murder on his mind. He imagines that William is too young to have formed a prejudice against his deformity, but he is wrong and in his anger and discovery of William's identity strangles the boy. Where does William's prejudice (or fear) come from? Why is the creature wrong about William's innocence of such knowledge?

At the end of the chapter, the creature announces his plan to Victor: that Victor create for him “one as deformed and horrible as myself [who] would not deny herself to me” (p. 120). The creature recognizes himself as intelligent, and he has all of Victor’s notes about how he was made. So why doesn’t the creature himself make his mate or propose to Victor that he teach him or that they collaborate in the making of his mate? Why does he demand, “This being you must create” (p. 120)?

CHAPTER IX

Victor concludes about the creature’s proposition that “justice due both to him and my fellow-creatures demanded of me that I should comply with his request” (p. 123). What competing forms or definitions of justice are at play here?

If you were Victor, would you agree to make the creature a mate? Why or why not? Are there perhaps other, unexplored possibilities?

VOLUME III

CHAPTER I

Why does Victor delay fulfilling his promise to the creature? What reason do you think is most important?

Mary is very self-conscious of the social impossibilities in her world—for example, that women, people from lower social classes, immigrants, non-Christians, and slaves cannot partake in the full range of social and political possibilities that are reserved for people (usually men) of privilege. This problem is represented in this chapter by Elizabeth’s inability to accompany Victor on his two-year jaunt across Europe. *Frankenstein* is also a novel about technical possibilities and impossibilities. How do social (im)possibilities and technical (im)possibilities play into each other in the novel? Does the relative lack of technical impossibility help us understand or feel differently toward the presence of social impossibility?

CHAPTER II

Why is there no account of what Frankenstein learns from his contacts in London, “the information necessary for the completion of my promise” (p. 133)? What might Victor need to learn to assemble a female creature that he did not already know?

Victor refers to himself as “a blasted tree; the bolt has entered my soul” (p. 135). To what does this refer? How might you compare Victor’s metaphor of being struck by lightning to the creature’s experience of the “spark of life”?

There are differences between how Victor approaches his first experiment and how he approaches his second experiment, despite his solitude in the latter. What are they? Is there a relationship between his different attitudes and their respective outcomes? Does Victor have a clearer sense of the second experiment’s potential outcomes? Why? Can we fully think things out in advance?

CHAPTER III

Why does Victor decide to destroy the new creature? Is it simply because of the first creature's appearance and a "countenance [that] expressed the utmost extent of malice and treachery" (p. 140), observed in the dimmest of light? If the creature had not appeared, would Victor have finished his work?

The confrontation between the creature—"You are my creator, but I am your master;—obey!" (p. 141)—and Victor in this chapter is perhaps the most dramatic scene in the novel. Is the creature's wrath justified? Have the tables turned as thoroughly as the creature imagines? Does Victor fully understand the scope of his decision not to cooperate with the creature's demands?

What else must Victor believe if he believes that creating a new creature would be an act of "the basest and most atrocious selfishness" (p. 144)? Can he reasonably hold this belief in his head while at the same time feeling that he "was about the commission of a dreadful crime" (p. 144) when he is disposing of the torn-apart remains of the second creature?

CHAPTER IV

Victor refers to destiny often in this chapter. Is choice now extinguished for him, and is fulfilling his destiny all that he has left to do? In what does Victor see his destiny? Are there points when he could have changed it? Is destiny the same thing as path dependency?

Compare the respective legal cases against Justine and Victor and how they play out. What are the crucial pieces of evidence? How do the accused and the judicial authorities behave? How do the physical evidence, the circumstances, and other factors come together for a verdict?

CHAPTER V

Why does Victor continue to insist to his father that he is a murderer?

CHAPTER VI

Why does Victor not tell Elizabeth about the creature, especially before or at least on their wedding night? Are his potential reasons the same as or different from his reasons for not telling his father or Clerval?

Why does Victor skip quickly over his period of madness after Elizabeth's murder and his father's consequent death? Might he have been subject to another trial, this time for the murder of his bride?

Victor finally tells the whole story to someone in this chapter—a magistrate of Geneva—who listens politely and then interestedly but uses elements of Victor's own story about the timeline and the creature's superior power in his refusal to assist Victor. Is this denial ironic? A condemnation of bureaucracy? A convenient plot device?

CHAPTER VII

Victor expresses an extensive oath (or small prayer?) in this chapter, seemingly the first time he has invoked some religious or quasi-religious power. Where does this oath come from? Does his turn to spirituality here have anything to do with his experience with science? With law?

Why does Victor make a distinction between the “ardent desire of [his] soul” and “the mechanical impulse of some [external] power” (p. 170)? Is this distinction easy to make for him? For us? Can Victor’s creature make such a distinction? If we were to make such a creature today, would it be able to do so?

WALTON’S LETTERS (CONTINUED)

Why, in his letter to Margaret, does Captain Walton tell her that he really believes Victor’s story? Is Victor’s account sufficient?

Even if science fiction, Mary’s novel is set in the past. Given that the novel is told through letters and stories passed from one person to another, do you think the readers of its day might have taken it as a real-life, nonfiction account? As an alternate history? As something like the radio broadcast of H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* in 1938?

Walton quotes Victor as calling the creature a “sensitive and rational animal” (p. 175) and then shortly afterward “a man” (p. 175). Is the former a good and full definition of the latter? How do we define personhood today? Can personhood include nonrational animals? Rational nonanimals? Is personhood unitary, or can there be different varieties of it?

Victor recognizes that he has a duty to support “his [creature’s] happiness and well-being” and a duty to humanity “paramount to that” (p. 181). What is the logic of Victor’s assigning the duty to humanity the paramount value? Is this view utilitarian—emphasizing the good of the many over the good of the one? Is it communitarian—that the creature really doesn’t belong to a broader community, whose values and safety are more important than the outsider’s? Is Victor’s logic here instead simply an excuse for his earlier mistakes? Are there times when the logic of privileging the larger number over the smaller number is incorrect and we should risk the well-being of the community for the individual?

Across the novel, there is something of a comparative ethics of suffering: Victor asserts that his suffering is greater than Justine’s, and Walton overhears the creature claiming that his suffering is greater than Victor’s. Is there any sense to be made of these comparisons? Can one being suffer more than another? Can suffering be objectively determined? Or is it entirely subjective? Is my suffering always more than yours simply because it is mine?

Do you agree with Walton that the creature does not feel true remorse but instead feels only frustrated that Victor is now free of him?

Do you believe the creature will extinguish himself? If you believe that promise, then do you believe the rest of his representations of his feelings and intentions? Why or why not?

ESSAYS

JOSEPHINE JOHNSTON, “TRAUMATIC RESPONSIBILITY”

The novel portrays an extreme case of scientific responsibility, but all of us are implicated in situations where we are responsible to moral standards, to particular ideas, and to other people. What kinds of responsibility do you have as a scientist, a citizen, a creator, a human being? How do you define these responsibilities? And what does it mean to “feel” them?

Johnston argues that Victor experiences two forms of responsibility: responsibility *for* and responsibility *to*. Are there other kinds of responsibility, in particular forms of shared or collective responsibility?

CORY DOCTOROW, “I’VE CREATED A MONSTER! (AND SO CAN YOU)”

Doctorow’s essay argues that science fiction is not really about predicting the future but rather about understanding the present. What does Mary’s novel, which was presumably written for a present two hundred years old, have to tell us about scientific practices today? Is it still relevant, or do we need new stories to confront the present?

According to the theory of the “adjacent possible,” technological change comes “when enough of the necessary stuff is in place” (p. 201). According to this logic, discovery can proceed only through so many pathways, and what’s coming always depends on what has come. Do you agree with this view, or do you think that true surprise and serendipity are possible? Is the direction of scientific progress somehow predetermined?

Doctorow argues that although technological changes are often the result of individual choices, how they are used becomes a collective choice. Using the example of Facebook, he talks about how disavowing a surveillance society is a difficult social choice—but still one that you can make as an individual. What collective choices concerning contemporary technologies do you disagree with, and what would it take for you to opt out?

JANE MAIENSCHIN AND KATE MACCORD, “CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN NATURE”

Maienschein and MacCord believe that Mary’s story is both “restrictive” and “instructive.” What do you think they mean by this? Do you agree with their assertion? Does *Frankenstein* go beyond these parameters?

What is your answer to the authors’ question “Is the creature human?”? If the creature is not human by the end of the novel, is there any way for it to become so?

What do you think the relationship is between what the authors call the biological concept of “human” and the social concept of “person”? Can one easily or neatly demarcate the social from the biological in this way?

ALFRED NORDMANN, “UNDISTURBED BY REALITY”

Nordmann’s essay suggests that modern incarnations of the creature, such as “Frankenfoods” and “Frankenmaterials,” are not scientific outcomes but a throwback to

alchemy and the supernatural. What is the relationship between science and belief today? When we entrust ourselves to an airplane or an algorithmic credit-scoring system, are we engaging in an act of reason or a leap of faith?

The publication of Mary's novel predated the modern term *scientist* by almost twenty years, and Nordmann argues that her novel is "not one of modern science" (p. 223). Is Victor a scientist? Would we recognize him as one today? If not, how would you describe him in contemporary terms?

Nordmann argues that contemporary technoscience is "undisturbed by reality"; in other words, we are creating materials, ideas, and life-forms that have no corollary in nature. At its most fundamental level, is science about understanding the natural world or about creating a structure of knowledge that may or may not resemble the reality we perceive?

ELIZABETH BEAR, "FRANKENSTEIN REFRAMED; OR, THE TROUBLE WITH PROMETHEUS"

Bear suggests that Victor's central character flaw is his lack of empathy. Do you agree? Is empathy an important faculty for the conducting of scientific research?

The other great character flaw that Bear highlights is Victor's narcissism. The great critique of scientific reason at the dawn of the Enlightenment was precisely this: that it was pure hubris for humanity to imagine itself at the center of the universe, to displace the external existence of God for a structure of knowledge built within our minds. Do you think the pursuit of scientific discovery is a fundamentally narcissistic enterprise or a humbling one? Can one be a successful *and* humble scientist, engineer, or creator?

Bear talks about the fact that Victor's beauty, his handsomeness, leads people to treat him better than they treat his creature. What role do you think beauty plays or should play in scientific discovery? Is the search for truth also a search for beauty, to paraphrase the poet Jonathan Keats, Mary's contemporary?

ANNE K. MELLOR, "FRANKENSTEIN, GENDER, AND MOTHER NATURE"

Frankenstein was initially published anonymously, and some critics or reviewers speculated that Percy Shelley wrote it. Do you think a man could have written *Frankenstein* as Mary Shelley wrote it?

Given Mellor's interpretation of the novel, what do you make of contemporary accounts that change Victor's gender—for example, the PBS digital series *Frankenstein, MD*, featuring a Victoria Frankenstein, or the children's book series *Franny K. Stein* by Jim Benton? If the creator at the center of the story was raised and socialized as a woman, in Shelley's time or today, would her relationship with her creation change? If so, how?

Are today's scientists and engineers who are involved in synthetic biology and other similar endeavors engaged in motherless creation?

HEATHER E. DOUGLAS, “THE BITTER AFTERTASTE OF TECHNICAL SWEETNESS”

How close is the analogy between Victor’s work and the work of the atomic scientists in the 1930s and 1940s?

Do you believe that the pursuit of “technical sweetness” is one reason why Victor completes his experiment?

If creating life is so technically sweet and technical sweetness is important in making the creature, why doesn’t Victor make the creature a mate?

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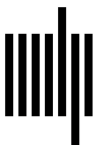
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