

INDE 212: Medical Humanities and the Arts
Stanford University School of Medicine
 Spring quarter 2018 Instructor: Audrey Shafer, MD

Assignment: read *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, bring to class an article, an item, a web resource or any other material (be creative!) related to Frankenstein and/or its current impact (e.g., artificial intelligence, tissue engineering, reproductive ethics). Alternatively, choose a couple of paragraphs from the novel itself – be prepared to read aloud in class and discuss why you chose that section

Responses:

Excerpts from *Frankenstein*:

(page numbers refer to paperback Dover Thrift Edition 1994)

pp. 32-4:

No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, like a hurricane, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs. Pursuing these reflections, I thought that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption.

...The summer months passed while I was thus engaged, heart and soul, in one pursuit. It was a most beautiful season; never did the fields bestow a more plentiful harvest or the vines yield a more luxuriant vintage, but my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature. And the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent, and whom I had not seen for so long a time. I knew my silence disquieted them, and I well remembered the words of my father: "I know that while you are pleased with yourself you will think of us with affection, and we shall hear regularly from you. You must pardon me if I regard any interruption in your correspondence as a proof that your other duties are equally neglected."

I knew well therefore what would be my father's feelings, but I could not tear my thoughts from my employment, loathsome in itself, but which had taken an irresistible hold of my imagination. I wished, as it were, to procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affection until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed.

I then thought that my father would be unjust if he ascribed my neglect to vice or faultiness on my part, but I am now convinced that he was justified in conceiving that I should not be altogether free from blame. A human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved, Cæsar

would have spared his country, America would have been discovered more gradually, and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed. [Note: plus a paper the student had written in 9th grade]

p. 45:

We passed a fortnight in these perambulations: my health and spirits had long been restored, and they gained additional strength from the salubrious air I breathed, the natural incidents of our progress, and the conversation of my friend. Study had before secluded me from the intercourse of my fellow-creatures, and rendered me unsocial; but Clerval called forth the better feelings of my heart; he again taught me to love the aspect of nature, and the cheerful faces of children. Excellent friend! how sincerely you did love me, and endeavour to elevate my mind until it was on a level with your own. A selfish pursuit had cramped and narrowed me, until your gentleness and affection warmed and opened my senses; I became the same happy creature who, a few years ago, loved and beloved by all, had no sorrow or care. When happy, inanimate nature had the power of bestowing on me the most delightful sensations. A serene sky and verdant fields filled me with ecstasy. The present season was indeed divine; the flowers of spring bloomed in the hedges, while those of summer were already in bud. I was undisturbed by thoughts which during the preceding year had pressed upon me, notwithstanding my endeavours to throw them off, with an invincible burden.

p. 62:

At these moments I wept bitterly and wished that peace would revisit my mind only that I might afford them consolation and happiness. But that could not be. Remorse extinguished every hope. I had been the author of unalterable evils, and I lived in daily fear lest the monster whom I had created should perpetrate some new wickedness. I had an obscure feeling that all was not over and that he would still commit some signal crime, which by its enormity should almost efface the recollection of the past. There was always scope for fear so long as anything I loved remained behind. My abhorrence of this fiend cannot be conceived. When I thought of him I gnashed my teeth, my eyes became inflamed, and I ardently wished to extinguish that life which I had so thoughtlessly bestowed. When I reflected on his crimes and malice, my hatred and revenge burst all bounds of moderation. I would have made a pilgrimage to the highest peak of the Andes, could I, when there, have precipitated him to their base. I wished to see him again, that I might wreak the utmost extent of abhorrence on his head and avenge the deaths of William and Justine.

pp. 90-92:

“One night during my accustomed visit to the neighbouring wood where I collected my own food and brought home firing for my protectors, I found on the ground a leathern portmanteau containing several articles of dress and some books. I eagerly seized the prize and returned with it to my hovel. Fortunately the books were written in the language, the elements of which I had acquired at the cottage; they consisted of *Paradise Lost*, a volume of *Plutarch’s Lives*, and the *Sorrows of Werter*. The possession of these treasures gave me extreme delight; I now continually studied and exercised my mind upon these histories, whilst my friends were employed in their ordinary occupations.

...“But *Paradise Lost* excited different and far deeper emotions. I read it, as I had read the other volumes which had fallen into my hands, as a true history. It moved every feeling of wonder and awe that the picture of an omnipotent God warring with his creatures was capable of exciting. I

often referred the several situations, as their similarity struck me, to my own. Like Adam, I was apparently united by no link to any other being in existence; but his state was far different from mine in every other respect. He had come forth from the hands of God a perfect creature, happy and prosperous, guarded by the especial care of his Creator; he was allowed to converse with and acquire knowledge from beings of a superior nature, but I was wretched, helpless, and alone. Many times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition, for often, like him, when I viewed the bliss of my protectors, the bitter gall of envy rose within me.

And p. 165:

“Oh, it is not thus—not thus,” interrupted the being. “Yet such must be the impression conveyed to you by what appears to be the purport of my actions. Yet I seek not a fellow feeling in my misery. No sympathy may I ever find. When I first sought it, it was the love of virtue, the feelings of happiness and affection with which my whole being overflowed, that I wished to be participated. But now that virtue has become to me a shadow, and that happiness and affection are turned into bitter and loathing despair, in what should I seek for sympathy? I am content to suffer alone while my sufferings shall endure; when I die, I am well satisfied that abhorrence and opprobrium should load my memory. Once my fancy was soothed with dreams of virtue, of fame, and of enjoyment. Once I falsely hoped to meet with beings who, pardoning my outward form, would love me for the excellent qualities which I was capable of unfolding. I was nourished with high thoughts of honour and devotion. But now crime has degraded me beneath the meanest animal. No guilt, no mischief, no malignity, no misery, can be found comparable to mine. When I run over the frightful catalogue of my sins, I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness. But it is even so; the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone.

Media and clips:

Anime: *Full Metal Alchemist Brotherhood Human Transmutation*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bvpJjbphJWQ>

Television Series: *Westworld* Season 1 official trailer

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IuS5hugOND4>

Television Series: *Black Mirror* Season 4 Black Museum consciousness in a teddy bear

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CV0J3Bq3BIc>

Film: *Frankenstein AI: a monster made by many* <http://frankenstein.ai/>

Films in discussion: *Ex Machina*, *Edward Scissorhands*, *Her*

Visual Images:

Sarah Saartjie Baartman ‘The Venus Hottentot’ <http://usslave.blogspot.com/2011/10/real-life-of-hottentot-venus.html>

Books:

Green, Ronald. *Babies by Design: The Ethics of Genetic Choice*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008

Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. Putnam, 1994.
(see also <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/19/books/i-feel-therefore-i-am.html>)

Original Work:

Poem by a student "Frankenstein Writes a Breakup Letter"

Concept:

Isolation – the importance of human connection in the process of healing, the isolation induced by sickness and suffering

Articles:

Lepore, Jill. The strange and twisted life of "Frankenstein" *The New Yorker*. Feb 12 and 19, 2018
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/12/the-strange-and-twisted-life-of-frankenstein>

Twilley, Nicola. Can hypothermia save gunshot victims? Emergency Preservation and Resuscitation (EPR) *The New Yorker* Nov 28, 2016
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/28/can-hypothermia-save-gunshot-victims>

Roose, Kevin. Facebook's Frankenstein moment. *The New York Times* Sept 21, 2017
<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/21/technology/facebook-frankenstein-sandberg-ads.html>

Nita A. Farahany, Henry T. Greely, Steven Hyman, Christof Koch, Christine Grady, Sergiu P. Paşca, Nenad Sestan, Paola Arlotta, James L. Bernat, Jonathan Ting, Jeantine E. Lunshof, Eswar P. R. Iyer, Insoo Hyun, Beatrice H. Capestany, George M. Church, Hao Huang & Hongjun Song. The ethics of experimenting with human brain tissue. *Nature* 556:429-32, April 26, 2018
<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-04813-x>

Sifferlin, Alexandra. First U.S. baby born after a uterus transplant. *Time* Dec 1, 2017
<http://time.com/5044565/exclusive-first-u-s-baby-born-after-a-uterus-transplant/>

Gunderman, Richard. What Mary Shelley's Frankenstein teaches us about the need for mothers. *Portland Press Herald* May 8, 2018
<https://www.pressherald.com/2018/05/08/what-mary-shelleys-frankenstein-teaches-us-about-the-need-for-mothers/>

Renstrom, Joelle. Artificial Intelligence, Real Emotion? *Slate* April 9, 2015
http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2015/04/ex_machina_can_robots_artificial_intelligence_have_emotions.html