

THE SENIOR COLLEGE MESSENGER

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This is an organ for members of Senior College to submit short articles that share news, opinions, reactions to the program and anything that they feel will be of general interest. Its regular appearance will allow for an exchange of opinion of topics of interest to the members.

Please submit contributions to the editor, Ed Barbeau at barbeau@math.utoronto.ca

“FRANKENSTEIN or THE MODERN PROMETHEUS” by Mary Shelley

A taste of the Book Club Discussion

Collation and comments by Linda Hutcheon

*For those of you who have not come along (yet) to our online Book Club meetings, we thought we might give you a brief taste of some of the very different “takes” on Mary Shelley’s classic Gothic novel *Frankenstein* (1818) that we read together in February. The joy of our Club is that each reader reads through his or her particular disciplinary lenses as well as individual personalities, and the result is bracingly varied – and great fun.*

*This was never more the case than in the typically wide-ranging discussion of *Frankenstein*. We asked three of our Fellows, with very different perspectives, to try to reconstruct their oral remarks in order to give you a sense of their particular “take” on this work. Here is a redacted summary of their responses. Do not be alarmed – there were many shorter and less elaborate comments made as well! But we want to give you a sense of the range of kinds of remarks.*

Mary Jane Ashley (Epidemiology and Public Health, Dalla Lana School of Public Health), the acting chair of the Book Club, was tasked with briefly introducing the novel and its 18-year-old author, who was challenged by poet Lord Byron (along with her other travel companions, her husband and poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Dr. Polidori) to write a horror or ghost story to while away their time in rainy Geneva. This introduction of the biographical and historical background (only summarized here) was framed by Mary Jane by her reviewing three “speculations” about why Shelley named her central character Frankenstein. Shelley herself claimed that the name came from a dream-vision in response to Byron’s challenge. The first speculation was rooted in biography: the young author’s mother, the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, had died 11 days after giving birth to her, and her father soon remarried. Her accomplished stepmother, an author, publisher and translator, may have known the German folklorists, the Grimm brothers who might have told her about the Frankenstein Castle in Germany. According to legend, it had been inhabited by one Johann Konrad Dippel, an alchemist who was reputed to have discovered an elixir of life and performed experiments on bodies he exhumed.

Legend also has it that he created a monster which he brought to life by a bolt of lightning. The second speculation was that the name came from the possibility that Shelley herself saw the ruins of the Frankenstein Castle and heard about the alchemist while on a trip in 1814 down the Rhine River (following her elopement with the older, married Percy). Deciding that both these theories were somewhat questionable (for reasons she explored), Mary Jane then turned to a third speculation: that the source of what is really a common Germanic name, Frankenstein, was in fact Benjamin Franklin, inventor and experimenter in electricity, whose work was known to Mary's husband through his Eton tutor, James Lind, who conducted demonstrations of galvanism (the activation of a muscle by means of an electric current). And that, she said, "is where I am putting my money".

Lisa Steele (artist; John H. Daniels Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Design), a long-time admirer of the novel, found herself responding to some early remarks by Fellows critical of Shelley's "over-written" descriptions and over-use of adjectives. Lisa countered that "she is, after all, a Gothic writer, writing a Gothic ghost story. Excess is almost a requirement of the genre – to thrill and excite the reader." She noted that Shelley was a "very Goth girl" (and only 18 years old), given to reading while lying on the grave of her dead mother – a practice that bespeaks a young woman who has experienced death as a personal act and developed her own highly charged vocabulary of horror from it. Lisa, however, sees *Frankenstein*, as so much more: infused with current scientific experimental knowledge (on electricity, galvanism) circulating in learned society at the time, charged with complex questions about the knowledge of life and death, the book speaks, for her, to loneliness and loss in deeply poignant ways, especially when the Monster himself speaks. She feels that the author – wise beyond her years, motherless, and recently suffering a miscarriage – shares the Monster's anguish and longing for the kind of love that only a parent can give. While Lisa amusingly called the gathering in Geneva of the "Romantic titans" a kind of "Woodstock of early 19th-century literature", she ended on a more serious note of admiration for the novel's deep moral questions around what the essence of being a living creature is, for it asks what it means when a human tries to replicate what nature (or God, as some would say) does in creating life: "It's a lot for a very young woman to be grappling with on the shores of Lake Geneva, on a rainy evening in the rainy summer of 1816, the Year Without a Summer – thanks to the volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora the winter before."

Harold Atwood (Physiology, Temerty Faculty of Medicine) came at the novel from yet another angle, focussing on its full title, *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*, pointing out that Prometheus was the Titan in who created Man and gifted him with fire stolen from the gods on Mount Olympus. The Olympian gods punished Prometheus for this theft by chaining him to rocks in the Caucasian Mountains. The novel's protagonist is a student who emulated Prometheus by using his knowledge of chemistry and physiology to create and give life to a humanoid being. Victor Frankenstein found the attributes of his living creature unexpectedly repellent and abandoned him. The creature took revenge, thus punishing Frankenstein for his misuse of science which led to unintended and unforeseen consequences.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* brings up the roles of science and scientists in society. To Harold's mind, the novel is remarkable in coming up with an allegory for our modern dilemmas linked to scientific advances, which Mary Shelley could not have foreseen. Among the most important of these is the creation of atomic weapons. In Albert Einstein, who enlarged humanity's views of time, space, the universe, and properties of matter, we can see an allegorical counterpart for Victor Frankenstein. Einstein saw his contributions to physics diverted to create atomic weapons. He was strongly against this and never intended such an outcome. A few days before his death in 1955, he signed the Russell-Einstein Manifesto, supported by many prominent scientists, which call on world governments to abandon the use of atomic weapons in warfare.

The creator of the Russell-Einstein Manifesto was Bertrand Russell, mathematician and philosopher, who warned against unwise use of science and destructive warfare for several decades. In 1931, he wrote: "... with our present psychology and political organization, every increase in scientific knowledge brings the destruction of civilization nearer". And in 1952 he expanded this theme in his collected essays on "The Impact of Science on Society". After reviewing all the positive and negative contributions of science to society, he concluded:

"Broadly speaking, we are in the middle of a race between human skill as to means, and human folly as to ends. Given sufficient folly as to ends, every increase in the skill required to achieve them is to the bad. Given knowledge and competence combined with folly, there can be no certainty of survival. Knowledge is power, but it is power for evil just as much as for good. It follows that unless men increase in wisdom as much as in knowledge, increase of knowledge will be increase in sorrow."

Coming back to *Frankenstein*, we have a text-book demonstration of Bertrand Russell's theme: Victor Frankenstein acquired knowledge, but his use of it, and his lack of ability to correct his mistakes, definitely brought a full-fledged increase in sorrow.

Very recently, we have seen an example of tinkering with genetic material to create an altered human, which is a much closer parallel to Victor Frankenstein's project. In Walter Isaacson's book, *The Code Breaker* (reviewed by the Senior College Book Club), we read that the maverick Chinese scientist He Jiankui played at being a 'Modern Prometheus' by genetically engineering two (ultimately three) human babies, born in 2018. In this instance, most scientists world-wide considered this to be an act of folly. He was condemned by other scientists and put on trial in the People's Court in China, where he was found guilty of "illegal medical practice", sentenced to three years in prison, fined \$430,000, and banned from doing any more reproductive science. But in the future, we may see genetic engineering of humans reconsidered.

We could pull up many other cases of misuse of scientific knowledge which illustrate Bertrand Russell's theme of the race between human skill as to means, and human folly as to ends. When the Internet was introduced and came of age in recent years, could most of us have anticipated that its benefits in handling and storing information would be paralleled by a huge increase in threats to individuals, propagation of conspiracy theories, and general erosion of social cohesion?

These are three of the more than 25 responses from Fellows during our recent two-hour discussion of *Frankenstein*. Not everyone spoke at length, but everyone who did speak presented their own perspective, often with passion. These three, though, should give you a sense of the variety – in range, focus, scope, points of interest – of the reactions of the Fellows.

What they do not provide, though, is a sense of the friendly and engaged give-and-take of the informal discussion. Why not come along one month and see for yourself? The next book club meeting is on April 4 when we will discuss Sue Roe's *In Montmartre: Picasso, Matisse, and the Birth of Modernist Art, 1900-1910*. As you can see, the range of the Book Club is not only in the responses but in the selection of books to read.

IN MEMORIAM

Frank Cunningham (August 5, 1940 - February 4, 2022)
Professor of Philosophy

Professor Cunningham was honoured with a back-page obituary in the *Globe and Mail* on Saturday, March 19, 2022.

Bernard Langer (May 23, 1932 - February 23, 2022)
Professor of Surgery, TGH, UHN

[We regret that the entry in the March issue of the *Messenger* was incorrect and should be deleted. Robin Armstrong was recognized in the February issue.]

CALENDAR OF COMING EVENTS

Events marked with **F** are for fellows and external fellows. Registration a few days ahead is necessary for each event. This can be done in response to a weekly email from Senior College to its members that describes the events or by going on line at www.seniorcollege.utoronto.ca.

Weekly Talks: Wednesdays, 2-4 pm

May 4: **David Moffett**, Criminology, University of Ottawa
Immigration and criminalization in Canada.

May 11: **Tom Tiekou**, Political Science, Western U, London
The African Union.

May 18: **Carl James**, Chair in Education, Community & Diaspora, York U.
How did we get to now? Systemic inequality, racism and the culture of exclusion in Canada.

May 25: **Barrington Walker**, History, Wilfrid Laurier University
Blackness, violence and modern Canada.

June 1: **Brendon Gurd**, Kinesiology & Health Studies, Queen's University
Can exercise be bad for you? The facts about exercise non-responders.

June 8: **Keith Baar**, Molecular Biology, UC Davis
Molecular biology and living longer, healthier lives.

Colloquia: Thursdays, 2-4 pm (F)

April 28: Chairs - Daphne and Charles Maurer
Is a post-racial society possible?

May 19: Chairs - Phil Sullivan, John Yeomans
Are there threats to academic freedom from within the university?

Book Club: Mondays, 2-4 pm (F)

April 4 (Chair: Meg Fox)
In Montmartre: Picasso, Matisse, and the Birth of Modern Art (by Sue Roe)

May 2 (Chair: Sara Shettleworth)
Fundamentals - Ten Keys to Reality (by Frank Wilczek)

June 6 (Chair: Maggie Redekop)
Who Do You Think You Are? (by Alice Munro)

July 4 (Chair: Linda Hutcheon & David Milne)
Lampedusa (by Steve Price)

Coffee hours: Thursday, 2-3 pm

April 7; April 21