

History Access Reading Group

Meet with Professor **BRUCE HEVLY** to discuss **Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein***

**Thursday, March 31, 2005
1:30–3:30 in Smith 306**

Near the end of his term in office, President Lyndon Johnson met with scientists at the White House for a National Medal of Science ceremony. During the event, he acknowledged the declining status of science as measured by public opinion polls. (The segment of the public viewing scientists “very favorably” fell to 37 per cent in 1971.) “You and I know,” Johnson said, “that Frankenstein was the doctor, not the monster. But it would be well to remember the people of the village, angered by the monster, marched against the doctor.”

Johnson's warning continued the long-established practice of drawing upon the image of Frankenstein's Monster to address reactions to the threat of technology in society. The identity and perceived existence of the threat has varied widely from time to time: a soul-denying mechanistic science, industrialism and industrial labor, pollution, nuclear weapons, artificial people, mad scientists—all have been read into the story of the misanthropic medical student and his inhumane creation. “You are my creator, but I am your master; — obey!” says the monster to Frankenstein, providing a resonant image for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which so often means seemed to become ends. (“Things are in the saddle, and ride mankind,” Ralph Waldo Emerson observed from mid-nineteenth century America.) It's an interesting challenge to try to read the novel in the context of 1818, when it was published, and also to think about why Frankenstein's monster achieved the status of a recurring symbol.

Please sign up for this group by visiting our website and clicking on the RSVP button or contacting History Undergraduate Advising

(543-5691, histadv@u.washington.edu):

<http://depts.washington.edu/history/studying/access/reading.html>

Please note:

The University of Washington Libraries are hosting a traveling exhibit on Shelley's work and its reinterpretations:

‘Frankenstein: Penetrating the Secrets of Nature’

The exhibit will be on view in Suzzallo Library, room 101, from March 4 to April 13. You may enjoy looking through the exhibit prior to our discussion.

<http://www.lib.washington.edu/ougl/exhibits/frankenstein/>

Study Questions:

1. What if we make the doctor the central figure in the story? What qualities and experiences are most important if we make him the villain of the piece?
2. Why is it always lousy weather wherever you find the monster?
3. Shelley gave her novel the subtitle: “The Modern Prometheus.” How does this fit the ways the story might be read?
4. For many of us, the key reference point for Frankenstein is not the novel, but the film version featuring Boris Karloff as the monster. If you've seen the movie, how did the imagery in the story change between 1818 and the 1930s?
5. Are artificial people naturally abhorrent, and if so why?
6. What makes Frankenstein a cautionary tale? If it ever was one, is it still?