

Teaching the Monster: *Frankenstein* and Critical Thinking

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The student's presentation posed the question "Who has the right to create life, God or Science?" Her Power Point displayed images of Boris Karloff, a Petri dish, and an unattributed painting of Adam and Eve. Passages from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* floated onto the screen from one corner or the other, in bright colors, properly cited. Those lines illustrated the grotesque appearance of the monster and the horror with which he is met by strangers and villagers. One slide featured a short animation of a green Frankenstein Monster doing a jig to "The Monster Mash." It was by far the most entertaining and enthusiastically produced presentation of the semester. Her fellow students were dazzled not only by the colors, the movement, the lightheartedness, and the variety of her visuals, but also by the obvious care she had invested in her work. Her final slide showed a cartoon monster head surrounded by question marks as she opened the floor for

questions. There were none. Her auditors had heard nothing that seemed incomplete or questionable, nothing they were not willing to swallow whole.

I was not as willing.

My more immediate concern was the simplistic, either-or, straw-man terms in which she posed her initial question. Was anyone questioning whether God had or was losing rights? Did readers of the novel and adults engaged in today's ethical issues need to take sides? Were there only two positions, both absolutes? Her bad faith question was simply a platform for her to voice an opinion—not to state a position based on research or thoughtful reading, but an opinion she'd walked into the semester with. Where I had looked for critical thinking, this very intelligent student had served up a sloganized dichotomy. She was on her way toward a most unremarkable paper, one I'd read many times before.

My second concern suggested a solution to the first. Students in that class—in that audience—were developing similar or conflicting arguments in their own work, yet no one had a word to say. Hers was a passive, absorptive audience. They were a “cowed, credulous, hypnotized mass” in Bertolt Brecht's description of the traditional theater audience (Brecht qtd. in Willett 1959, 170). While the presenting student might have been distracted by her own technical creativity, the larger breakdown in this classroom was in her spectators, who failed to engage with and challenge her provocative ideas. They were not a community in that room, but individuals, writing separate papers, to be read by a single authority, for separate grades. Frequent peer review had done nothing to alter that. This was “student-centered” to the point of narcissistic obsession.

The lack of critical thinking in the individual and of a critical response in the classroom were due to the passive/absorptive mode which dominates student reading and in-class behavior. Brecht's response to the absorptive, emotional, and individual experience of theater audiences in the 1920s was to fill his stages with intrusive artifice: unpolished singers, half-completed sets, title cards announcing scenes. Such material reminders prevented Brecht's spectators from becoming absorbed in the play and feeling unthinkingly.¹ He wanted them to be aware, always, that the people and story were represented *by design*, by a series of choices, and to be asking what those choices mean. Brecht's method, usually known as the Alienation Effect (*Verfremdungseffekt* or V-Effect), keeps the spectator in two minds simultaneously, the one taking pleasure in story, music, or character, the other taking note of what the play is doing, what its author is saying.² The more the spectator is aware of the play as artifice and provocation, the more she is aware, too, of her fellow-playgoers and of her role as a part of a particular collective.

A pedagogy of alienation would seek to disrupt the habits which enable and entrench the absorptive. In the case of teaching *Frankenstein*, this would mean emphasizing the monster, returning to the monster *as* a monster, refusing to allow him to melt into a symbol in the classroom. The compelling monstrosity of Shelley's novel continues to appeal to student readers, who often seize on its moral strictures in their discussions. Student responses generally fall into one of two categories: the Monster is a victimized child, mistreated and misunderstood, or the Monster is evil. These can be productive positions from which to begin conversations about responsibility, scientific ethics, parenting, or society, but tend to minimize Shelley's monster. One makes him a vulnerable human, not a monster, and the other makes him a stock figure of danger, a pure "other," the figure which he subsequently became in film. This erasure is a problem because as the monster vanishes, so do opportunities for learning, both in the literary and the themed classroom. This essay proposes the importance of the monster, for this novel and for the classroom, and suggests a practice of "teaching the monster" as a pedagogy of alienation that can be applied beyond *Frankenstein*.

Absorptive reading produces two kinds of responses, often in the same reader: judgment and sympathy. These responses reinforce each other, but the monster, which defies categories, kills, and is physically repellant, can counter both of those responses. When students encounter *Frankenstein* for the first time, they think in the simple terms of most monster movies. Monsters are evil, and the hero is good, and it's all very clean and neat and black and white and universal. They enjoy *Frankenstein*, sometimes to their own surprise, and they feel for either Victor or the Monster-Creature, and so follow the story with what might be called the imagination of the heart.

We are all charmed by the monster's own narrative of his yearnings, trials, and traumas. We feel that of the two characters, creator and creation, we would far rather spend time with the creation. He is kinder, more loving, and more poetic than his creator. The tragedy of the book is so transparently the way the world deforms and embitters him. If he is a monster, it is society that made him so. He is, then, only a metaphor of a monster.

Armed with good-hearted native sympathy, students are quick to find parallels in our world. The most frequently mentioned is Dylan Klebald, one of the Columbine shooters.³ The comparison reveals how human Mary Shelley makes her creature. It is an emotional response to a narrative that works overtime to provoke our emotions. But the comparison can also reveal its own flaws. For every student who wants to sympathize with Klebald, another points to his victims. Sometimes students use the comparison to return to the novel, pointing out that Shelley's monster is a clear-minded

serial killer and that with the debatable exception of William, his murders are premeditated and intentional.

Student readers often switch, with a taste for the unambiguous, from presuming the monster to be wholly bad, to exonerating him completely, and sometimes swinging back to “evil.” But the ideal isn’t to find the proper moral stance or to move from sympathy to condemnation, but to engage both. Sympathy and condemnation both operate at the level of the individual. Both sympathy and condemnation—the “whose fault is it” debate—curtail the kind of critical thinking and application that is the goal of most of the courses in which *Frankenstein* is taught. The students’ imagination of the heart and the professor’s conceptual framework do not intersect. Student sympathy does not lead to analysis. Sympathy and analysis run parallel to and often counteract or resist each other.

At issue in a sympathy/critical thinking dichotomy is *not* the emotion/reason split that is so often gendered and artificially posited.⁴ Instead it is a question of restriction and expansion. Sympathy, with the monster or with his victims, is essentially conservative, in the broadest sense of that word. Its attention is limited and limiting to individual characters or behaviors and to narrow contexts, and it tends to look wistfully at an unfulfilled promise of stability in the status quo. The student who writes that the monster is an abandoned child who needs his father’s love resituates the monster as son, secures him within the category he “should” have been in, and so reinstates the “happy family” narrative as the norm rather than asking why, in this novel, that narrative disintegrates.⁵ Sympathy is an insufficient academic response because it functions to preclude questions and instead seeks to return to a posited fictional world before the events of the novel, a world which is unqualified and universal.

The gap between sympathy and analysis has been subject to a great deal of discussion, particularly among teachers of *Frankenstein*, many of whom use *Frankenstein* specifically because it is accessible and emotionally engaging. Two relatively early essays on teaching *Frankenstein* encapsulate the problem that extends beyond this novel. Art Young refers to the “affinity” or “relationship” (1990, 153) and Sylvia Bowerbank to the “sympathy” that a student develops toward this novel (1990, 145).⁶ They are only two of the hundreds of teachers who encourage an emotional attachment between students and the novel’s young author or her characters. They expect that the students’ involvement will enable them to interrogate their own reading experience more easily, or as Eric Sonstoem puts it, to read “self-reflexively,” and engage in critical thinking (2006, 151). Does enjoyment or familiarity lead to analysis? It can. Yet many of us find that while the classroom discussions are more

pleasant when students enjoy the reading, those discussions are not therefore more critical or more concerned with underlying issues.

Almost all essays on teaching *Frankenstein* describe the importance of merging the sympathetic and analytic ways of knowing and find this easier to do with *Frankenstein* than with other novels. Yet the actual transition of sympathy into critical reasoning remains relatively mysterious. Bowerbank writes, "I ask the students to express their feelings on a topic, and then I help them gradually take responsibility for their views and assess the intellectual and social implications of holding such views" (1990, 150). This is an ideal, and many of us attempt that move—but how? Serial drafts? Conferences? How exactly do we "help" students to "assess the intellectual and social implications"? And how is *Frankenstein* particularly conducive to doing that?

Working individually with students—serial drafts and conferences—can often accomplish this, for this paper, this semester, this student. But besides the questionable economy of energy in having the most important learning take place on a one-on-one basis, we reinforce the idea that the resulting paper matters only because it earns a grade from its one reader. Students do not see their work and thought as part of a larger conversation, or interacting in any way with the "real" world, or even with their own classroom society as a particular group of thinkers. We're attempting to teach systemic thinking through individual, sympathetic methods and our successes are all individual. As I discovered with the presentation with which I opened this essay, failures of critical thinking are often failures of collective engagement. The alienation that V-Effect or teaching the monster enables finds its purpose in the awareness of the audience or class. Teaching the monster can unite sympathy and analysis in a way that is collective and classroom-based.

"Frankenstein" is perhaps the world's most famous monster, but of course Frankenstein isn't the name of the figure at the center of the novel, who has no name, and is referred to variously by its creator as Creature or Monster and occasionally as Demon. Many students, like Victor, vary between "creature" and "monster" (and "Frankenstein"), sometimes within a sentence, and with little attention to the difference between the words. Shelley's monster is both monster and creature, both Natural Man and unnatural fiend. That paradox is perhaps best illustrated in Walton's consternation, after Victor's death, at finding himself torn between his initial horror at the "vision . . . of such loathsome, yet appalling hideousness" and a "compassion" which responds to the monster's voice and passionate misery (Shelley 2004, 240). For Walton and nearly everyone else in the novel, the *sight* of the monster precedes and conditions all subsequent responses. "Teaching the monster" aims to replicate this alienating experience in the classroom; keeping

the monster in “sight” at all times, we can draw attention to the paradox rather than choosing sides.

After an initial description of the monster’s yellow watery eyes and thin black lips, Shelley limits herself to describing other people’s horror. Those reactions remind the reader of his monstrousness, disrupting the gentle identification the reader tends to feel so that Shelley repeatedly evokes and then challenges our sympathy. Similarly, V-Effect, also translated as estrangement, elicits sympathy and casts a skeptical doubt upon it.⁷ Brecht’s plays are and must be pleasurable, his characters individual, the songs strangely appealing. V-Effect engages audience emotion in order to create a tension—a dialectic—between the emotional response and critical thought. Neither precedes the other, temporally or in importance. They coexist in tension. The classroom too needs to allow the space for monsters and conceptual concerns to reflect upon each other, not start with one and progress to the other. Neither should provide an unquestioned grounding for the other.

In a sense, the monster is the perfect embodiment of a V-Effect. His seams and sutures in the films and his frustrating lack of a name in the novel function as reminders that both the monster and the fiction in which he lives are constructed and “could have been constructed Otherwise” by Victor Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley, and by James Whale, to name his most famous creators (Cohen 1996, 12). A monster with multiple parents but no family, he is both human and inhuman, alive and dead. Stressing the monster keeps his “categorical effrontery” in the forefront of students’ minds (Pender 1996, 149). A monster’s very existence constitutes a “refusal to participate in the classificatory order of things” or a more menacing threat to “smash [those] distinctions” altogether (Cohen 1996, 6).

Returning to the monster as disruption and as character inhibits passive and uncritical responses just as V-Effect seeks to prevent sentimentality. To preempt but not prevent the wholly sympathetic reading of *Frankenstein*, I assign a critical essay before, rather than after, the novel. I have successfully used “Monster Theory (Seven Theses),” Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s conceptual and playful introduction to *Monster Culture* (1996). Other articles would do as well; Stephen Pender’s “No Monsters at the Resurrection,” included in Cohen’s collection, selections from Donna Haraway’s “The Promises of Monsters: A Regenerative Politics for Inappropriate/d Others” (1992), Marie-Hélène Huet’s *Monstrous Imagination* (1993), and Heather Urbanski’s *Plagues, Apocalypses and Bug-Eyed Monsters* (2007) offer similarly useful discussions of monsters and monstrosity. All of these selections locate the fascination of monsters in their exuberant expansion beyond boundaries and beyond logic, and help students begin to ask which boundaries Frankenstein’s monster violates and which categories he refuses to accom-

modate. Those categories are as often social as physical, and each of these readings examines monsters and monstrosity within their own historical context. Politics, art, science, and religion help us to understand why monsters are “created” differently in different eras.

Prefacing students’ reading of the novel with an article frames the novel in a difficult context just as Brecht’s stage setting literally framed the action as reminders of his artifice. Their reading of the novel will be no less pleasurable, but will take place partially through the lens of questions the monster raises. Students think *while* feeling an attachment to the monster, whereas reading an article *after* the novel requires re-thinking, placing thinking separate from feeling. Thinking and feeling do not invalidate each other. Rather, each enriches the other.

Focusing on the monster, on his construction and the artifice of his body, can act as a reminder of the constructedness of the novel itself. As what Catherine Belsey calls an interrogative text, *Frankenstein* “tends to employ devices to undermine the illusion, to draw attention to its own textuality.” It refuses “a single point of view, however complex and comprehensive” and instead brings multiple points of view “into unresolved collision or contradiction” as Victor’s representation of the monster and the monster’s self-representation are at odds (Belsey 1980, 92). As responsive readers to this text, then, we should

seek not the unity of the work, but the multiplicity and diversity of its possible meanings, its incompleteness, the omissions which it displays but cannot describe, and above all its contradictions. In its absences, and in the collisions between its divergent meanings, the text . . . contains within itself the critique of its own values. (Belsey 1980, 109)

The materiality of the monster serves the same function as Belsey’s “interrogative text,” exposing its own gaps, and the gaps in *Frankenstein*’s world, in Shelley’s world, and, with enough attention, the gaps in our own. Drawing attention to the monstrous rather than the sympathetic in the text helps students acknowledge and take account of the assumptions embedded within it.

The word “monster” incorporates Old French and Latin words meaning to reveal or display, and secondarily, because of what was revealed, to warn. The monster can reveal something internal, as the longings of its mother during gestation, or the sin of its conception, or village, or nation.⁸ The monster might also be a warning, the prophetic embodiment of a nightmare of progress, the visual emblem of momentous change. Heather Urbanski details the many ways that “speculative fiction . . . scrutinize[s] our nightmares” about the present, and so reveals what cultural shift preoccupies us as we move into any number of possible futures (2007, 8). The monsters of speculative fiction creep out of the cracks in a post-apocalyptic planet created as

an imaginative extension of what already is.⁹ Just as our nightmares are lurid and irrational actualizations of fears we have about conditions in our “real” lives, the monster as the embodiment of verbs, of *to reveal* and *to warn*, suggests the making visible of things otherwise unseen and unknowable: past sin, future apocalypse, or—what only seems more mundane—present ideology.

Victor Frankenstein creates the monster out of dead bodies, not out of a tectonic shift of ideologies. But the status of those bodies is itself contested. Victor creates his monster from the battle between religion and science for the meaning of dead bodies, as he insists that his actions would bother only the superstitious, yet still performs them in “hiding” and in “secret” (Shelley 2004, 82). He creates his monster at the edges of science itself, which is haughtily disdainful of its alchemical roots in the dark ages but timid and compliant in its approaches toward contemporary religious-moral structures.¹⁰ Although he eulogizes his own childhood home as the ideal of the patriarchal family, Victor creates his monster without one, as revolutions throughout Europe call into question the *inégalité* of that tradition. This might reflect an increasing sense of a hollowness of the Father-function in society and government, or in a more reactionary vein project a dystopic vision of the chaos resulting from such a failure, but at the very least the lack of a family stands as a glaring negation against the background of political and social upheaval. Where the sympathetic, universal reading sees Victor as a Dad and the Monster as his child, historical context defamiliarizes that relationship and instead raises more difficult questions. The monster is site and time specific. Victor creates his monster from dead bodies, but he creates this monster, in this way, with these particular difficulties and consequences, because of those shifts in his culture.

Screening the iconic James Whale films *Frankenstein* and *The Bride of Frankenstein* while students are reading (again, not afterwards) can also preclude the absorption of reading. Shelley’s monster then coexists with Boris Karloff’s (and Elsa Lancaster’s), generating comparisons and discussions of monstrosity without theory. Because I incessantly ask them to look at the monsters, rather than “power,” “gender,” or “science,” students see gaps and inconsistencies in their own definitions of a monster, in Shelley’s novel, or in Victor’s justifications, or between 1818 and 1931, or in power, gender, and science. Students find their own questions rising up to complicate or contradict their sympathetic reading, rather than seeking to answer conceptual questions I have posed.

Teachers have devised innumerable methods to invigorate the in-class discussion, most recently with digital media. Eric Sonstroem’s FrankenMOO project is exceptional in its efforts to lure student involvement and also to maneuver that involvement into critical thinking (through what he calls a

“fixed and hierarchical textual landscape, a MOO’s *architecture*” [2006, 150]). Yet he too finds that the average internet-savvy student is more likely to use the web to find plot summaries than to enter into a community of ideas (162). Similarly, while students text each other throughout the day, they tend to post on discussion boards as if they’re turning in homework, rather than having a conversation. Like the papers they write, these posts have only one real reader, the one with the power.

Yet one of the strengths of the classroom and the theater is that the individual, as spectator or student, is simultaneously a member of a collective audience or class; the struggle between modes and responses in their own mind is also the struggle in the room, in the shared experience. Especially since the conceptual framework of courses which include *Frankenstein* frequently concentrates on social history or dynamics, it seems particularly important to stress equally students’ simultaneous roles as members of a class and as individual readers.

My discussion board assignment requires that students keep track of details regarding how the monster behaves and how he is treated in the films and the novel, as well as differences between the films and the novel. Again, instead of asking students to rethink, after reading or seeing the movie, I stress the assignment they’ll be asked to do before and during. Just as Brecht’s *V-Effect* was meant to counteract a theater experience in which spectators were passively “hypnotized or bamboozled by some form of stage magic” (Esslin 1975, 6), keeping the students as aware (or more) of the assignment as of the novel or movie inhibits a passively receptive state.

Rather than pretending that a discussion board erases power differences among us, I make those differences more visible, with rules and with points. That is to say, instead of seeking to “naturalize” an artificial activity, I bring out both its artifice and the power relationship that underlies it, just as I am attempting to do with the monster. Students must post a certain number of observations to earn a certain number of points. Full points are awarded only for posts which neither state the obvious nor repeat someone else’s observation. The first posts tend to make easy observations (“Fritz the hunchback is mean” “Elizabeth is totally passive”) but quickly students must reach for details that matter or that supplement idea already expressed; they must offer different interpretations or questions in order to get credit. That reaching beyond the simple, the necessity of responding to another student’s ideas or observations, jump-starts an actual conversation. Because the movies are fun, and because students are still reading when they first post, most return to the discussion board, not only to earn more points, but to continue the conversation, each adding a perspective or interpretation for the whole to ponder.

For example, after one student commented in an early post on the cliché of the lightning storm, others developed the idea of Whale's use of light and dark to represent good and evil, of shadows used to dehumanize (particularly the monster) and darkness used to blur outlines and depersonalize, as in the graveyard scene. Without my interference, they then turned to questions about racism and identity in Whale's story and in Shelley's. This thread eventually merged with one on the presence of fire in the two films, in which one student suggested that Fritz's torturing the monster with the torch was his first taste of power, and that maybe Whale was doing something with power and fire throughout the two movies. Another wondered whether the monster's burning of the De Lacey home in the novel was a sign of power or of weakness. Another set of threads joined women and whiteness, in the films, with women and death, in the novel, to raise questions about the connection between idealized femininity and monstrosity. The main difference effected by this teaching method is that most of the students in the class participated in the conversations above, rather than the three who sit in the front. Not only were all of the students exposed to a broad range of observations, almost each one was on her way to developing an idea in which she felt personally invested.

The "conversation" takes place when I make explicit the rules that guide real conversations, when I take what might seem natural and make it unnatural, and when I keep returning the students to monsters. Paradoxically, by being obtrusive in the assignment I can stay out of the actual conversation, and the complications and interpretations are raised by students, individually and collectively. The complications and the insights are their own.

Not all teaching of *Frankenstein* culminates in writing, or in writing that is a significant goal of the course. But those of us for whom it does generally surrender the collective classroom to the students' individual and solitary writing and revising processes. Instead we need to maintain the dialectic, so that writers anticipate the objections, questions, challenges, and observations of others. To do this we need a classroom where students *will* make objections and suggestions.

The assignments I have described above find their logical extension in a reformation of the presentation into peer review. Like the earlier exercises, this assignment 1) precedes the "natural" activity—reading or movie watching or conversation or, here, writing—so that a student's "alienated" consciousness of it infiltrates her writing process; 2) involves all of the class members, whose participation is enforced by a point system that requires them to actively listen to and respond to their classmates; and 3) preserves the teacher's presence as an intrusion upon the process but not upon the ideas developed or the direction of that development. If this final exercise takes

place in a class where V-Effect has been the consistent method of teaching, where teaching the monster has already tempered students' sympathetic attachment, it will be a familiar way of moving past students' habitual reluctance to raise difficult questions.

The revised presentation takes place when students have developed their arguments and are completing first drafts. Presenting students circulate a one-paragraph abstract of their argument. The spectators each sit in front of a computer, logged on to a class chat space. Before the presentation, they read the abstract and post questions they hope will be answered. As before, points are awarded only for questions that potentially further the discussion, not those that repeat comments already posted. Again students must reach some predetermined number of points by the end of all the presentations.¹¹ Their comments, questions, challenges, and suggestions continue throughout the presentation, so that they are reading, writing, and listening concurrently.

Yet as we cannot replace sympathy with condemnation in our reading, neither ought we to replace sympathy with antagonism in the classroom. I cannot imagine an atmosphere less likely to produce ambitious student work than one in which a student writer feels under attack. At the end of the presentation, therefore, the questions, not the presenter, must be scrutinized by the class. First, students point out which questions and comments were answered or addressed in the course of the presentation. The presenter can be given an opportunity to expand upon that issue, if she chooses. Then the class as a whole isolates two or three of the remaining questions as most relevant and useful for the student writer. The professor needs to model a selection process, explaining why some questions are less and others more helpful to the presenter/writer, but for the remainder of the presentations the class ranks the questions and challenges, arguing and discussing among themselves until they reach consensus on the top three, which the presenter is then asked to address or to turn back to the questioner.

Many of the revised papers incorporate those questions, at times stepping from them to larger, more rigorous explorations. But the real payoff of this exercise is its effect on preparation. If students prepare their presentations knowing that people will be looking for gaps in their assumptions, many will interrogate their own work with their classmates' critical voices in their heads: What problems will my audience find? What contradictions am I missing? What are the larger consequences of this idea? What nightmare, what sin is hidden here?¹² Through this process, students no longer (only) write for an individual judging professor who already knows more than they do. They write for each other and learn from each other.

Several scholars have posited a Brechtian pedagogy as a way of dismantling the apparatus of authority in the classroom and establishing conditions

more favorable to student engagement. These discussions offer to “aid our understanding of how teachers can be effective intellectual coaches who incite critical thinking” (Perkins 1994, 224). Their version of the Brechtian classroom increases student agency and student and faculty awareness of curricular-enforced homogeneity. They elaborate on the parallel between a “spectator-centered focus in theatre [and a] student-centered approach in education” (Russo 2003, 257). There are two points I have to add which provide underpinning to teaching the monster.

First, a Brechtian pedagogy does *not* simply translate into a student-centered classroom. Brecht does not transfer power to his audience but manipulates them just as much as the bourgeois dramatist does.¹³ He simply does it in full view. Where Brecht leaves the endings of plays undetermined, he not only empowers audiences to decide how the story ought to end, he effectually compels them to do so.

Secondly, V-Effect is dialectic, requiring a sympathy to frustrate and an audience of individual spectators who are simultaneously a collective audience. Without these, a spectator remains uninvolved, and either accepts or rejects the political argument in accordance with his or her prior convictions, just as countless students enter the classroom willing to accept information but uninterested in considering its value or credibility. Sympathy involves the theater spectator with the characters and the problems they face. By highlighting the artificiality of the performance, estrangement moves that involvement from the individual character to the struggle. Keeping their balance between their sympathies and pleasures and the problem posed, spectators and readers participate in the struggle of ideas and the weight of the issues. That participation, that struggle, comes partly out of the “natural” sympathy generated by individual characters, and partly out of the frustration of that sympathy by overt and “artificial” stagecraft. The dialectical struggle between the two, in the audience itself, is far more productive than either side of the thinking/feeling opposition on its own.

A pedagogy of alienation or estrangement draws students into a struggle not between the teacher and the student, not between the reader and the class, but within the student herself—primarily between her tendencies toward sympathy and her desire for moral certainties, but also between her roles as student, as reader, and as class member. The teacher, like the playwright, provokes the students by crafting an experience that elicits and also refuses familiarity. It isn't the *teacher* intruding on the easy pleasure of feeling, but the student's own mind facing its contradictions. With *Frankenstein* this means stressing the monster in all his strangeness, with his seams showing.

A monster is inherently a thing of contradiction, a paradox, and teaching the monster (rather than the author, or the issues) keeps both the char-

acters and the novel itself unnatural. Teaching the monster does not and ought not preclude the sympathy students feel for him. Teaching the monster—his necrosity, his self-contradictions, his allegorical persistence—makes strange what is otherwise familiar and invisible, and exposes the artifice of his composition and possible decomposition. Teaching the monster, “producing” an alienating classroom reading of *Frankenstein*, enables other classroom practices that teach students to view critically their own emotional attachment long enough to raise questions: to practice critical thinking.

Notes

¹ Brecht objected to the “empty emotionalism” of traditional theater (Knust 1974, 62).

² See Reinhold Grimm (1991) for a particularly clear discussion of Brecht’s devices, as well as his ideological purpose.

³ High school shooters show up in other classroom discussions on *Frankenstein* as well—see Phillips (2003) for example. Students have cited more recent events at high schools and colleges frequently this year, but with the same intent.

⁴ Suzanne Clark writes that “What the pseudostruggle of critical reason and sentimental emotion obscures is something other than the idea of emotion. It obscures the performance of exclusion, the defining and reproducing of an intellectual class as gendered” (1994, 97).

⁵ Much important scholarship on *Frankenstein* does in fact focus on the family narrative and dynamic. Anne K. Mellor’s early and important feminist exploration of the novel observes that Victor “fails to love or feel any parental responsibility for the freak he has created” (1998, 221). More recently Harriet Hustis begins her discussion with the hypothesis that “By focusing on the issues of paternal negligence and the need for responsible creativity implicit in what is perhaps the paradigmatic myth of the romantic movement, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* deconstructs the story of Prometheus as a masculinist narrative of patriarchal authority and (in)justice” (2003, 845). Both of these passages are from opening paragraphs, so that these observations, this family orientation, function as the beginning of explorations, not their sum total. Sympathy, in the form in which I’m positing it, prevents further exploration, rather than enabling it.

⁶ Both of these essays are from the MLA *Approaches to Teaching Shelley’s Frankenstein*, which was published in 1990, notably in the early days of *Frankenstein’s* academic popularity.

⁷ Karl-Heinz Schoeps discusses the complication of “naïveté” in Brechtian V-effect. “It has always been a problem for Brecht . . . to explain [sympathetic] characters in terms of epic theater, distancing, and estrangement. All of them represent genuine and natural goodness in an evil world which must be changed, and their fate arouses the spectators’ empathy” (1989, 195).

⁸ See Huet’s *Monstrous Imagination* (1993) and Pender (1996).

⁹ Heather Urbanski’s “nightmare model” for speculative fiction presumes three categories of fear: power, science, and the unknown. Some narratives, she notes, cross

these borders rather freely, and she suggests that while Frankenstein is the model mad scientist, the “nightmare” of this story is “the potential for devastation inherent in too much individual power” (2007, 17).

¹⁰ The modern chemists, according to M. Waldman, “have indeed performed miracles. . . . They ascend into the heavens” and their labors “scarcely ever fail in ultimately turning to the solid advantage of mankind” (Shelley 2004, 76, 77). He considers Victor a “disciple” (77). While this discourse might be read as blasphemously replacing religion, it replicates the religious, providential narrative, replacing God, perhaps, with science, but maintaining its structure intact. See Richards (1994) for a very thorough discussion of the embeddedness of cultural politics in scientific theory.

¹¹ There are technical issues that would vary depending upon the professor’s access to instructional rooms and social networking software. Blackboard, for example, allows for “raising hands,” so the professor can ensure that all students have the opportunity to participate.

¹² To some extent, this functions as a mock-trial might in law school. The speaker, imagining an unsympathetic and actively questioning listener, is required to examine every aspect of her argument and raise every possible objection herself.

¹³ Elizabeth Russo (2004) and Sally J. Perkins (1994), among others, see the unresolved endings of Brecht’s plays as a transfer of authorial power to the audience, which then determines (more or less consciously and actively) possible moral or realistic endings to the narrative.

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Melissa Bissonette
Teaching the Monster:
Frankenstein and Critical Thinking

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Student readers often switch, with a taste for the unambiguous, from presuming Mary Shelley's monster to be wholly bad, to exonerating him completely, and sometimes swinging back to "evil." Both sympathy and condemnation—the "whose fault is it" debate—curtail the kind of critical thinking and application that is the goal of most of the courses in which *Frankenstein* is taught. The students' imagination of the heart and the professor's conceptual framework, sympathy and analysis, run parallel to and often counteract or resist each other. This essay proposes the importance of emphasizing the monster himself, returning to the monster *as* a monster, refusing to allow him to melt into a symbol in the classroom; it further suggests a practice of "teaching the monster" as a pedagogy of alienation that can be applied beyond *Frankenstein*.

Megan Brown
The Memoir of Provocation:
A Case of "Me Studies" in
Undergraduate Classes

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This essay argues that undergraduate courses in memoir and autobiography can improve students' writing, reading, and critical thinking abilities, in part because such courses allow students and instructors to explore contemporary American culture's complex fascination with individuality and self expression. Also, these classes can encourage students to be critics of the commodification of "life stories" and the desire of autobiography readers/consumers for total authenticity—a desire that seems to have been strengthened by recent scandals about fabricated or exaggerated memoirs. First, the essay explores why creative nonfiction courses focused on memoir may be charged with fostering self-indulgence, and why those charges are sometimes justified. Then, the essay builds a case for the unique *benefits* of teaching, reading, and writing memoir, emphasizing the important issues that memoirs encourage students to contemplate, including the "authenticity" and appeal of narrative voice, the social construction of subjectivities, and the ethics of writers and readers.

Doran Larson
Toward a Prison Poetics

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The essay argues that prison writing bears not only a common subject but recurrent, formal traits, and that these generic traits emerge directly from prison writing's material links to the strategies of power exercised within prisons in general and to the particular conditions of each writer's incarceration. By analyzing tropic veins common to all prison texts, we discover a generically coherent body of literature as germane to discussions of