Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*

**Introduction: literature/the monster lives on …**

- Frankenstein and political dissent

- Frankenstein and film
  Film trailers: “Frankenstein” (1931) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BN8K-4osNb0) and “I, Frankenstein” (2013) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxOSPfUw3qw)

- Back to the monster’s literary origin: Shelley’s novel (1818) – genre, composition, plot
  ghost story, horror / science fiction

**I. Literature, science, nature**

Novel’s subtitle: “The Modern Prometheus” (science gone astray vs. sublime nature)
Frankenstein is engulfed in his scientific research in his laboratory detached from reality and the world around him (nature, society, family).

**Critical questions:** What is the relationship between life and science? Does science provide a complete picture of reality, or does it rather leave out something most essential to reality? Can it satisfy the desires of the human spirit? What is the ultimate goal of human life? What role do we ascribe to nature and where does literature come into the picture?

**II. Monstrosity, colour, gender**

In most films, the monster is reduced to its abhorrent physical appearance, its body, whereas in the novel it stands out for its “powers of eloquence and persuasion,” as Frankenstein tells Walton in the frame story (p. 159).

**sight (visual) vs. speech/language (verbal)**

object/other subject/self

body mind

**Critical questions:** How do we define monstrosity? What kind of knowledge/power goes into the making of definitions? What role does the dialectic of verbal and visual play? How do we deal with difference – colour difference, gender difference, cultural difference, etc.?

Quotes:

1. “It was on a dreary night of November, that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me that might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my candle was nearly burnt out, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs. How can I describe my emotions at this catastrophe, or how delineate the wretch whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features beautiful. Beautiful! – Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriances only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips.” (p. 35, my italics)

2. “It was nearly noon when I arrived at the top of the ascent. For some time I sat upon the rock that overlooks the sea of ice. A mist covered that and the surrounding mountains. Presently a breeze dissipated the cloud, and I descended upon the glacier. The surface is very uneven, rising like the waves of a troubled sea, descending low, and interspersed by rifts that sink deep. The field of ice is almost a league in width, but I spent nearly two hours in crossing it. The opposite mountain is a bare perpendicular rock. From the side where I now stood Montanvert was exactly opposite, as the distance of a league; and above it rose Mont Blanc, in awful majesty. I remained in a recess of the rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene.” (p. 67, my italics)

3. “Be calm! I entreat you to hear me, before you give vent to your hatred on my devoted head. Have I not suffered enough, that you seek to increase my misery? Life, although it may only be an accumulation of anguish, is dear to me, and I will defend it. Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine; my joints more supple. But I will not be tempted to set myself in opposition to thee. I am thy creature; I ought to be thy Adam; but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.” (p. 68, my italics)

4. “Thus I relieve thee, my creator,” he said, and placed his hated hands before my eyes, which I flung from me with violence; “thus I take from thee a sight which you abhor. Still thou canst listen to me, and grant me thy compassion. By the virtues which I once possessed, I demand this from you. Hear my tale: it is long and strange, and the temperature of this place is not fitting to your fine sensations” (p. 69, my italics)

5. “By degrees I made a discovery of still greater moment. I found that these people possessed a method of communicating their experience and feelings to one another by articulate sounds. I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science, and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it. But I was baffled in every attempt I made for this purpose. Their pronunciation was quick; and the words they uttered, not having any apparent connexion with visible objects, I was unable to discover any clue by which I could unravel the mystery of their reference. By great application, however, and after having remained during the space of several revolutions of the moon in my hovel, I discovered the names that were given to some of the most familiar objects of discourse: I learned and applied the words fire, milk, bread, and wood. I learned also the names of the cottagers themselves. The youth and his companion had each of them several names, but the old man had only one, which was father. The girl was called sister, or Agatha; and the youth Felix, brother, or son. I cannot describe the delight I felt when I learned the ideas appropriated to each of these sounds, and was able to pronounce them. I distinguished several other words, without being able as yet to understand or apply them; such as good, dearest, unhappy.” (p. 77, my italics)

6. “I had admired the perfect forms of my cottagers – their grace, beauty, and delicate complexions: but how was I terrified, when I viewed myself in a transparent pool! At first I started back, unable to believe that it was indeed I who was reflected in the mirror; and when I became fully convinced that I was in reality the monster that I am, I was filled with the bitterest sensations of despondence and mortification. Alas! I did not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity.” (p. 78/79, my italics)