Science Fiction: *Frankenstein* and Revisions  
First-Year Writing Seminar, Fall 2013  

Course Information

Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of the void, but out of chaos; the materials must, in the first place, be afforded: it can give form to dark, shapeless substances, but cannot bring into being the substance itself. (Mary Shelley, 1831 Preface to *Frankenstein*)

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is not only one of the earliest and most famous works of science fiction, it’s also a story that has been retold many times over. This course investigates the genre of science fiction by focusing on Shelley’s novel and on the novels and films it has inspired: H. G. Wells’s *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, James Whale’s 1931 film *Frankenstein*, and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*. How do later authors and filmmakers retell Shelley’s story? What appeals to them in her novel? What elements of *Frankenstein* do they retain, what do they alter, and why? Exploring these questions, we will examine how authors from Shelley onwards use the *Frankenstein* story to engage with contemporary scientific developments; our readings may include Darwin’s *The Descent of Man*; Ray Kurzweil’s *The Age of Intelligent Machines*; and lectures by John Abernathy and William Lawrence, two doctors whose early nineteenth-century argument about the source of life may have been Shelley’s original inspiration. Our thematic focus on revision parallels the writing practices we will develop in the course: just as a novel or film may creatively rewrite and respond to an earlier story or scientific idea, so is the academic paper a kind of creative rewriting of and response to another text; just as radical revision enables the novelist or filmmaker to create an original work, so does revising and rewriting one’s own drafts enable the student writer to make an original argument. The course’s assignments aim to help students develop a productive writing practice through short exercises as well as drafts and revisions of four formal papers.

**Course Goals**

• to master the fundamental elements of academic arguments, which advance arguable theses that are propelled by a genuine motive, supported by well-analyzed evidence, and developed through a progressive structure

• to develop a productive writing process, including pre-draft writing, drafting, and revision, as well as giving and receiving feedback

• to gain ease and skill with the exchange of ideas in seminar discussions

**Required Texts**

1. Books: Available through the NYU Bookstore. It’s important that you purchase the edition specified.


2. Coursepack: Available through the NYU Bookstore. There will be two volumes, one available immediately, the other available by mid-semester.

The coursepack and books are on reserve at Bobst.

3. Films: I’ve put copies on reserve at Bobst, but you may want to consider purchasing your own copy (via Netflix, Amazon, iTunes, etc.) as you’ll need to have the films on hand when you write about them.

Please note that there are multiple versions of *Blade Runner*. Watch the one labeled “The Final Cut.”


**Course Requirements**

• Process Writing:

— Response Papers: there will be five reading responses due over the course of the semester. These should be 300–400 words (one double-spaced page). For each response, I'll give you a general prompt to reflect on. Bring two printed copies of your response to class and be ready to hand one in at the end of class. Electronic submissions of reading responses won't be accepted, so make sure to find a working printer in time for class.

— Cover Letters: for all of the drafts and revisions that you submit (six, in total), you'll submit a cover letter of about 500 words (three-quarters of a page, single-spaced) in which you reflect on your essay and writing process. There will be specific instructions regarding cover letters with each assignment.

— Draft Response Letters: for a certain number of the papers that we workshop, you'll write a draft response letter of about 500 words in which you tell the author what works in their essay, what you find problematic, and how you think they should revise. Again, more specific instructions will be included with each writing assignment.

— an End-of-Term Reflection of about 700 words (one single-spaced page), in which you discuss your development as a writer this semester

Process writing will be graded check, check-minus, or check-plus.

• Participation & Citizenship: You should arrive punctually and be prepared for class, which means that you’ve completed the reading and any assignments, and brought with you all necessary materials. You should participate actively in seminar discussions and other activities, which includes contributing thoughtful comments
and questions; engaging with other students as well as the professor; and listening attentively.

• Three formal essays:

Assignment 1: An analysis of a passage in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. 1200 words.

Due Dates:  Draft (D1)—2 p.m. on September 21  
Graded Revision (R1)—6 p.m. on October 4

Assignment 2: An argument about the relationship between Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and James Whale’s *Frankenstein* or *The Bride of Frankenstein*. 1500 words.

Due Dates:  Draft (D2)—2 p.m. on October 19  
Graded Revision (R2)—6 p.m. on November 1

Assignment 3: An argument about *The Island of Doctor Moreau* or *Blade Runner* and Shelley’s *Frankenstein* or one of the Whale films that engages with Gènète’s theory of intertextuality. 2000 words.

Due Dates:  Draft (D3)—in class on November 27  
Graded Revision (R3)—6 p.m. on December 13

**Grading**

15%  Paper 1  
20%  Paper 2  
30%  Paper 3  
20%  Process Writing  
15%  Class Participation

**Policies**

• Written Work: Deadlines are important in this class; extensions will be granted only in the case of illness, family emergencies, or religious observance. Late revisions will be penalized 1/3 of a grade for each day that they are late. Late drafts may not receive written feedback. Late process writing may not be accepted.

• Attendance: You may miss up to two classes without penalty; more than two absences for reasons other than illness, family emergency, or religious observance will affect your grade; habitual lateness will also affect your grade.

• Academic Integrity: As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website ([http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)); we will discuss academic integrity, including responsible source use and collaboration, in class this semester.

• Technology: In order to make it easier for everyone to focus on the collaborative and cooperative work of the seminar, you may not use a laptop, tablet, smartphone,
or Google Glass in class for any purpose, unless otherwise instructed. This means that you must print out any assignments or papers (your own or your classmates’) needed for class on any given day. Please turn off or silence your mobile phone.

You are welcome to email me with any questions that arise over the course of the semester. But please note that my normal hours for reading and responding to email are regular working hours (Monday–Friday, ~9 am to 5 pm). I usually don’t read email in the evenings and on weekends.
Make an argument about a moment in *Frankenstein* that you find to be especially strange, surprising, unexpected, or puzzling. Your paper should focus on a brief passage or scene; it should ask a genuine question about that scene; and it should present an answer to that question. Your finished essay should be 1200 words (about four pages, double-spaced).

Goals for this assignment:

— ask a genuine question that serves as a motive for your essay
— develop an answer to that question
— smoothly incorporate well-chosen and apt quotations from the novel
— closely analyze quotations

Grading Standards:

When grading, I evaluate the words on the page. Although neither effort nor improvement is factored into the essay grade, writing does tend to improve through revision. Effort and engagement are accounted for in your grades for participation and process writing.

a paper in the A-range successfully achieves the goals of the assignment: it asks a real question about the novel; presents an answer to that question; supports its explanation through careful, insightful work with evidence and analysis; is written in a clear style; contains very few errors of spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

a paper in the B-range resembles an A-range paper in some ways, but may be less focused; may establish a functional but unsubstantial motive; may lack evidence in places, or present evidence that is under-analyzed; may contain problems of style or errors of spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

a paper in the C-range resembles a B-range paper in some ways, but may be unfocused; may lack a motive or present a motive that is simplistic or perfunctory; may include very little quoted evidence; may consistently present summary rather than analysis or may misinterpret evidence; may contain errors of expression, spelling, or mechanics that distract or obscure the meaning.

a paper in the D-range may show signs of beginning to engage with the issues, topics, and sources of the assignment, but lack focus or significant engagement with the sources; D-range papers usually fall short of the page requirement.

Pluses and minuses represent shades of difference.

Response Papers:

Response 1.1: From the first volume of *Frankenstein*, choose three scenes or passages about which you want to ask questions—scenes or passages that you find startling or puzzling. These could be passages that don't fit your preconceptions of the novel (especially if this is your first time reading it), or they could be passages that you find weird within the context of the book itself. You don't need to transcribe the passages in full on your reading response, but please note
where they appear so that I can find them. For each passage, formulate some questions about what seems strange or confusing in it.

Response 1.2: Choose a passage from the Lawrence–Abernathy debates that you think helps us to answer a question about *Frankenstein*—possibly even one of the questions that you wrote about for Response 1.1. Write a response paper in which you explain this new understanding. Again, you don’t need to transcribe the passage in full, but cite it so that I can locate it.

**Essay #1 Draft Cover Letter:** Each time you hand in a draft or a revision, you’ll hand in a cover letter along with it. For the draft of Essay #1, please write a letter, addressed to your readers—that is, to the class at large—in which you answer the following questions and present any other concerns that you have. Think of the letter as an opportunity to ask for the kind of feedback you think you particularly need. Your cover letter should be about 500 words; please note that it is not included in the word count for the assignment. Paginate it as 0 (in Word, select “Page Numbers” from the “Insert” menu, then select “Format”; set “Start at” to 0 rather than 1).

— What do you see as your motive? (Resist the temptation to quote your essay and instead paraphrase.)
— What do you see as your main idea or point? (Here, too, rephrase rather than quote.)
— What do you see as the most interesting part of your paper?
— What are the biggest problems you’re having? What do you want your reader to help you with? Rather than asking about style, wording, mechanics, your conclusion, etcetera, go for the big stuff: motive, use of evidence, effectiveness of analysis.

**Essay #1 Draft Response:** For each of the draft workshops, I’ll ask you to write a certain number of letters. Please take some time to compose these letters and try to make comments that you think will help the writer revise. When you come to class on our workshop days, please bring a printed copy of the letter(s) you’ve been assigned. Please also upload your letters.

Avoid trivial commentary (including focusing your letter on matters of style) and think in larger terms about what this writing really needs. No draft submitted in this course will be in such good shape that it requires just tinkering with tone or vocabulary or grammar. Be a rigorous, incisive editor; offer helpful, reflective commentary—but do so in a tone that is kind and constructive, never harsh or aggressive.

Directions:

As you read and re-read each essay, make notes (marginalia, underlining, question marks, and so on) that help you understand the paper (and maybe give the writer feedback). Then write a letter of 500 words to the author in which you address these questions:

— In your own words, what is this paper about? What is its idea? Bear in mind that as writers, we often don’t recognize the most promising idea in our own drafts! See what you find if you doubt the stated motive and thesis and look for the real insight of the paper elsewhere.
— What are this draft’s strengths?
— What is the writer’s most interesting point?
— Remembering that motive, evidence, and analysis are the priorities for this assignment, give the writer advice about what to focus on in revising.

*Essay #1 Revision Cover Letter:* Each time you hand in a revision (four times) you’ll hand in a cover letter along with it. The length and format should be the same as for draft cover letters. In your letter, addressed to me, please answer the following questions and address any other concerns you have:

— Reflect on how your motivating question and answer to that question have changed between draft and revision.
— What are you happiest with in this revision?
— What was most challenging in your drafting and revision process? How did you approach those challenges?
— What are you most dissatisfied with in this paper? What would you continue to work on in further revisions?
— What do you see as the strongest part of your paper?

Assignment I Schedule

*Week One*

Readings marked (cp) appear in the course packet; readings not so marked are books you should purchase.

Wednesday, September 4

Introductions

*Week Two*

Monday, September 9

reading assignment: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, vol. 1
writing assignment: Response Paper 1.1 due in class: discussion of *Frankenstein* and reading responses

Wednesday, September 11

reading assignment: Shelley, *Frankenstein*, vol. 2
writing assignment: nothing to hand in, but continue keeping track of passages in the novel that you want to ask questions about in class: discussion of *Frankenstein*; motives for writing

*Week Three*

Monday, September 16

reading assignment: *Frankenstein*, vol. 3 + John Abernathy, “An Enquiry” and “Physiological Lectures” (cp) + William Lawrence, “An Introduction” and “Lectures on Physiology” (cp)
writing assignment: Response Paper 1.2 due in class: discussion of *Frankenstein*, Abernathy, and Lawrence; evidence and analysis

Wednesday, September 18

reading assignment: Sample Student Essay #1 (handout)
writing assignment: none, but bring both of your response papers with you to class
in class: model draft workshop; a common language for writing; developing topics and drafts

Saturday, September 21
due by 2 p.m.: draft of essay 1 = D1
please submit this paper to the folder named D1 under “Resources” on our Classes site

Week Four

Monday, September 23
reading assignment: two drafts (TBA)
writing assignment: draft response letters for each writer + bring printed copies of both workshop papers to class + bring a printed copy of your draft to class
in class: draft workshops

Wednesday, September 25
reading assignment: two drafts (TBA)
writing assignment: draft response letters for each writer + bring printed copies of both workshop papers to class + bring a printed copy of your draft to class
in class: draft workshops

Wednesday, September 25 and Thursday, September 26
mandatory 30-minute draft conference with me; I’ll circulate a sign-up in class

Looking ahead:

Friday, October 4
due at 6 p.m.: R1
please submit this paper to the folder named R1 under “Assignments” on our Classes site