

Show Intro

- I wanted to do something different for my episode this week. If you've been listening to the show for a while, you already know I am a college composition teacher. I also have a lot of experience with literature. I spend most of my time teaching composition with a focus on analyzing arguments and pulling meaning from written works, so I like to work with texts that I find rich in that regard.
- NEEEEEEEEERD!
 - One of the classes I teach is about learning composition and argument through the topic of monsters and, to a more significant extent, horror. Horror is a genre full of subtext and arguments, and the class I teach uses combinations of monster texts and essays written about them to explore how to write analyses and arguments.
 - One of the first monster texts I use in the class is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.
- Now, a couple of things I want to preface here. First, this is a kind of stealth pilot, and second, this episode isn't a literary analysis of *Frankenstein*. I know that'll make at least three listeners sad and most very happy.

- I call this episode a stealth pilot because it is a kind of adaptation of a podcast I have wanted to do for the past couple of years as a supplemental project for my class. That podcast would be more about literary analysis, but plenty of what we will talk about, such as science, historiography, and biography, would also be present. The other element is that it wouldn't just be looking at *Frankenstein*, as a text, but would have dedicated issues to analyzing texts written about *Frankenstein*, and other monster texts covered on that podcast.

- So as you listen, please consider what I've said carefully and let me know if you want to see that other show. I would like to make that happen.

- The "Maude" to our "All in the Family" as it were.

- Second, regarding the literary analysis, which this episode here is not, we will be treating this novel as a source text for weird topics. There is a whole lot of weird shit to cover, and I am excited to dive into it.

- So, let's do just that. Let's get into *Frankenstein* and the weird and supernatural elements surrounding it. But the best place to begin is with the author, Mary Shelley.
- Primary Sources:
 - *Frankenstein* from [Project Gutenberg](#), this would be the 1831 edition, which is essential for later.
 - *Frankenstein 200: The Birth, Life, and Resurrection of Mary Shelley's Monster* by Rebecca Bauman
 - I also have a few other sources I reference. If I do not call them out by name, you'll at least find them in the show notes.

Mary Shelley

- Before we get waist-deep into the charnel-house slurry that is *Frankenstein*, what do you guys remember about it and its author, Mary Shelley?
- First, when I think of *Frankenstein*, it's almost impossible for me to separate it from film. It's THAT tied into the history of cinema and I feel like that's a topic for Distraction Hole.
- As for Shelly, I remember a lot about the story of this story's creation.

- Were you ever assigned it as a reading in high school or college? Have you read it since?
 - I went to Jackson Public School in Mississippi. We barely had to read anything.
 - Any favorite adaptations?
 - Young Frankenstein.
- As we've seen just by discussing this so far, *Frankenstein* is a tremendously important work of literature and still incredibly influential. It is also one of the first wide-spread science-fiction novels, though it is more often lumped into the horror genre, which isn't entirely inaccurate.
 - I won't go into the specifics of the history of science fiction and horror and where *Frankenstein* would fit in the relative timeline of the development of those genres. Still, I just want you to know I could easily spend an hour on it.
 - I appreciate your restraint. Also, I feel like genre definitions ruin our interpretation of fiction. Stories can be many things and defining them by genre is a bit of a disservice in my book.
- There would be no *Frankenstein*, as we know and love it today, without Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, formerly Mary

Wollstonecraft Godwin. For simplicity and time, we'll just go with Mary Shelley from here.

- Mary Shelley was born on August 30, 1797, and died on February 1, 1851, at the criminally young age of 54.

- In the annals of history, Mary Shelley is known as an English novelist responsible for the gothic novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* in 1818.

However, she was so much more than that, with a fascinating history and an equally fascinating body of work.

- However, Mary Shelley was also a tragic figure, not only because she was a brilliant woman in the early 18th century and all the problems that resulted from simply existing. She also experienced uniquely tragic circumstances that make her a goth icon.

You were right the first time, 19th century

- Oh yeah? Does **SHE** have a shirt in Hot Topic?

- We'll look at her life up and through the writing of *Frankenstein* and then see where she ended up.

- Mary Shelley was the second child born of the marriage between Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. And let me tell you, this was pretty much the 18th-century example of

a power couple. When both of your parents have their lengthy Wikipedia article, you know you're the result of a fascinating and influential union.

- Wollstonecraft was a feminist philosopher, educator, and writer.
- She not only rocked two affairs with Swiss painter Henry Fuseli and American diplomat Gilbert Imlay, but she was also known for writing novels, treatises, a travel narrative, a history of the French Revolution, a conduct book, and a children's book. Her most famous book was *A Vindication for the Rights of Women* in 1792.

◦ YAS QUEEN. Is that still a thing?

- As for William Godwin, he is considered to be one of the first prominent anarchist and utilitarianist thinkers. He was a journalist, political philosopher, and novelist. He is a significant figure in European literature and published two crucial political texts in a year: *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* and *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*. The former was an attack on political institutions, and the latter an attack on aristocrats

in the form of a mystery novel - kind of like *Knives Out* or *The Glass Onion*.

- Was he also a guillotine salesman? Because if he wasn't he was leaving money on the table.
- Godwin and Wollstonecraft met at a gathering hosted by a publisher to celebrate one of his authors, Thomas Paine. It wasn't until a couple of years later, when he read one of Wollstonecraft's books, that he fell for her. They began an affair and would marry to legitimize the birth of the eventual Mary Shelley but retained private accommodations and would communicate through notes delivered by servants.
- However, tragically, Mary Wollstonecraft died 11 days after the birth of their daughter, Mary. Death and birth would be something that would haunt young Mary down the line.
- I am cutting out a LOT here. Especially about how the relationship of Godwin and Wollstonecraft was somewhat scandalous. What I should mention here is, despite his best intentions, Godwin fucked up pretty hard.
 - He wrote a memoir about his lost love and revealed a great deal about her life that would have been considered unsavory by larger society. Because of

this, for a long time, Wollstonecraft was more known for scandal than for her own merits, but thankfully, feminist reinterpretation has opened up how she and her work are viewed.

- While there is no doubt that Godwin adored his former wife, he did eventually remarry in 1801. Godwin's new wife, Mary Jane Clairmont, was another author. Young Mary Shelley would not get along well with her.

- Regardless, Mary Shelley was raised in a feminist environment with anarchist leanings. Godwin provided well for his children and Mary Shelley received a pretty rich education, especially compared to many women of the era.

- However, things got complicated in 1814. Mary Shelley, at the age of 17, was seduced by the infamous fuckboy Percy Bysshe Shelley.

- I need a shirt with Shelley's picture on it and "Fuck Boy" written in gothic font beneath it.

- Now, Percy Bysshe Shelley was a writer and Romantic poet of the era who had a Reputation. He was born August 4, 1792, and would die July 8, 1822. So, if you are keeping track of dates, we already see this will be an untimely end for Percy.

- I could go on about Percy Shelley, but that is a subject for another sort of show. He may be best known for his poem "Ozymandias" today, but as a contemporary figure, he could easily be labeled a "personality" socially, artistically, and politically.

○ A Kardashian with talent. Got it.

- What we need to know is that when Percy met Mary, he was estranged from his first wife, Harriet Westbrook. Estranged, but not divorced. Percy, at this time, was a devotee of William Godwin, and in his time with Godwin, he fell in love with Mary Godwin. They often met, in secret, at the grave of Mary Wollstonecraft.

○ "My darling, I love you. Let us consummate our relationship ON THE ROTTING CORPSE OF YOUR FUCKING MOTHER." I feel like this should be discussed more some day.

- The two would later elope after William learned of Percy's interest in Mary and forbade him from being in his home. They wouldn't be wed, officially, until late 1816, but they were effectively married here.
- Again, there is so much here that is just deliciously spicy that we're blowing through.

They would travel through a recently war-ravaged Europe, with Mary's stepsister Claire Clairmont in tow.

- The War of the Sixth Coalition. Don't ask me to explain this one. It was a Napoleonic war.

- We don't have enough time or pewter miniatures to do this subject justice.

- Eventually returning to England, Mary was pregnant with her first child with Percy. William Godwin had essentially disowned her, and she and Percy were penniless. Complicating things was that Percy's first child, with his estranged wife, Harriet, had just been born. Even more complicated is that Percy was most definitely having an affair with Claire, Mary's stepsister, who just happened to travel with them.

- Chemical castration exists for a reason.

- Mary gave birth to a two-month premature daughter on February 22, 1815, which quickly died. This would not be the first brush with child death that Mary would face. This death would also haunt her and play into some of the inspiration of *Frankenstein*.

- This reminds me of Anne Rice. Interview with the Vampire had its origins in the death of her daughter.

- A year later, the strange polycule of the Shelley-Godwin-Clairmonts would be in much better shape financially, and Mary would birth a son, William.

- We are just about at the writing of *Frankenstein* at this point, but there is a lot that is going to happen that filters in and around the period of the writing of the story. Before that, however, let's go ahead and take a quick break.

The Birth of Frankenstein

- And we are back. So, we've spent a fair amount of time on the background of Mary Shelley. Still, I think it is essential because there are [critical events](#) in her life that are a bit weird, dark, and tragic that help to inform the writing of the novel and are part of why the novel has the reputation and influence it does.
 - That and you can't take the lit major out of me.
- So, have any of you heard of ["The Year Without a Summer?"](#)
- YES actually, history buff that I am! It led to a lot of historical events!

- In 1816, climate abnormalities resulted in an average global temperature reduction of around 1 degree Fahrenheit. This resulted in an unseasonably cold summer and food crises across Europe.

- This climate event was likely the result of a volcanic winter induced by the 1815 eruption of Mt. Tambora in Indonesia, which itself followed the 1814 eruption of Mayon in the Philippines, which followed about 3 to 4 other eruptions in previous years.

- The Mt. Tambora incident is notable as that same volcano may have partially resulted in the volcanic winter of 536 CE. I will eventually cover this history of little ice ages in the future as they tend to line up with apocalyptic beliefs.

- Apocalypses and apocalyptic cults are definitely included in our wheelhouse.

- Ultimately, this climate change resulted in a hazy, cold, and wet summer. In this gloom, however, the polycule would travel to Geneva to stay with one Lord Byron, who merits no further introduction. Also, there, ostensibly as Byron's physician, was John

Polidori, who would write *The Vampyre*, one of the first significant vampire novels.

- I should also note that at this point it was likely that Claire was Byron's mistress, and it is not radical to propose that Mary, Percy, and Byron were involved. It was likely that Polidori may have also had a thing with Lord Byron.
 - In fact, just assume Lord Byron was fucking everyone. There could be an entire hour devoted to this guy. I haven't even mentioned the goddamn monkey or the peacock, either.
 - You can NOT just mention orgies, a monkey, and a peacock and leave me hanging like this.
 - It is likely [the inspiration](#) for Polidori's vampire novel was Lord Byron, for example.
 - I don't think it was blood he was sucking on.
- I'd like to read from Mary Shelley's introduction of the [1831 edition of the novel](#) for a moment, to set the scene.
 - "But it proved a wet, ungenial summer, and incessant rain often confined us for days to the house. Some volumes of ghost stories, translated from the German into French, fell into our hands. There was the History of the Inconstant Lover, who, when he thought

to clasp the bride to whom he had pledged his vows, found himself in the arms of the pale ghost of her whom he had deserted. There was the tale of the sinful founder of his race, whose miserable doom it was to bestow the kiss of death on all the younger sons of his fated house, just when they reached the age of promise. His gigantic, shadowy form, clothed like the ghost in Hamlet, in complete armour, but with the beaver up, was seen at midnight, by the moon's fitful beams, to advance slowly along the gloomy avenue. The shape was lost beneath the shadow of the castle walls; but soon a gate swung back, a step was heard, the door of the chamber opened, and he advanced to the couch of the blooming youths, cradled in healthy sleep. Eternal sorrow sat upon his face as he bent down and kissed the forehead of the boys, who from that hour withered like flowers snapt upon the stalk. I have not seen these stories since then; but their incidents are as fresh in my mind as if I had read them yesterday."

o Jesus. This woman needed a puppy.

- So, during a rainy night in an apocalyptic summer, the whole crew was together telling ghost stories. But let's talk about the drugs for a second.

- From the article ["Lake Geneva as Shelley and Byron Knew It"](#) by Tony Perrottet: "Wine flowed copiously, as did laudanum, a form of liquefied opium. One night, when Byron read aloud a haunting poem, Shelley leapt up and ran shrieking from the room, having hallucinated that Mary had sprouted demonic eyes in place of nipples. It was in this surreal, claustrophobic atmosphere that she experienced the famous nightmare that became the lurid plot of *Frankenstein*"

○ Sounds like some old Something Awful "Photoshop Phridays".

- So. A couple of thoughts on this. First, while it is not confirmed that Mary herself partook of the laudanum, it is pretty much accepted that Percy and Byron did. I do not doubt, however, that Mary partook. I can't prove it, but when surrounded by fuckboys of a certain libertine domain, I would not be surprised that she partook.
- Secondly... Percy's hallucination of eyes where Mary's nipples were. I have no way of proving this, but I have a suspicion, given the lurid nature of this assemblage, that the ghost stories

may have been a post-coital activity. I would not be shocked that it was just a bunch of nude freaks hopped up on drugs and scaring the shit out of one another.

■ Transfer this whole scene to a double-wide trailer and it loses all the romance and becomes an episode of COPS.

■ I also want to note that Percy was likely using laudanum to deal with [chronic nephritis](#), an inflammation of the kidney.

■ Laudanum would also play a role in the death of Mary's sister, Fanny, who committed suicide by overdosing on the drug that October or November.

■ It is not surprising to note that laudanum does show up in the novel, and can be seen as part of the character of Victor's radical mood shifts. Granted, it is not the only reason for Victor's mood swings, obviously.

- As for why ghost stories, well, obviously the setting was perfect for them, and ghost stories are cool as shit. However, ghosts were frequently on the minds of those in the incoming Victorian era.

- Mary Shelley, back when she was little Mary Godwin, was [no stranger to spiritual presences](#). She often found herself hanging around the grave of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, and some writings suggest she may have felt her mother's presence there. It certainly was in a metaphorical sense given the courtship of Mary Godwin and Percy Shelley.
- In her own words, from an essay titled, fittingly, ["On Ghosts"](#) from 1826, she writes: "For my own part, I never saw a ghost except once in a dream. I feared it in my sleep; I awoke trembling, and lights and the speech of others could hardly dissipate my fear. Some years ago I lost a friend, and a few months afterwards visited the house where I had last seen him. It was deserted, and though in the midst of a city, its vast halls and spacious apartments occasioned the same sense of loneliness as if it had been situated on an uninhabited heath. I walked through the vacant chambers by twilight, and none save I awakened the echoes of their pavement."
- But, she later writes, "There is something beyond us of which we are ignorant. The sun drawing up the vaporous air makes a void, and the wind rushes in to fill it,--thus beyond our soul's ken there is an empty

space; and our hopes and fears, in gentle gales or terrific whirlwinds, occupy the vacuum; and if it does no more, it bestows on the feeling heart a belief that influences do exist to watch and guard us, though they be impalpable to the coarser faculties."

o So her own belief if ghosts feels a little agnostic, I suppose?

- In this haze, each of the four would get to work on their tales, and within a few days, after much thought, Mary Shelley arrived at a spark of an idea, pun-intended, with the concept of galvanism and the question of what could reanimate the dead. We'll get to the galvanism in a bit.

o I turn to Mary Shelley's own words from the 1831 edition of the novel:

- "Night waned upon this talk, and even the witching hour had gone by, before we retired to rest. When I placed my head on my pillow, I did not sleep, nor could I be said to think. My imagination, unbidden, possessed and guided me, gifting the successive images that arose in my mind with a vividness far beyond the usual bounds of reverie. I saw—with shut eyes, but acute mental vision,—I saw the pale student of

unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion. Frightful must it be; for supremely frightful would be the effect of any human endeavour to mock the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. His success would terrify the artist; he would rush away from his odious handywork, horror-stricken. He would hope that, left to itself, the slight spark of life which he had communicated would fade; that this thing, which had received such imperfect animation, would subside into dead matter; and he might sleep in the belief that the silence of the grave would quench for ever the transient existence of the hideous corpse which he had looked upon as the cradle of life. He sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes."

■ Great. She gets this, I get nightmares Smokey the Bear tried to eat my grandma.

- The first four chapters were written shortly following the death of Fanny in October or November.
- However, death followed this eclectic family, dogged and unrelenting. In December, Percy's first wife, Harriet, was found drowned in a lake in Hyde Park - an apparent suicide.
 - It was following this death and desiring custody of his children with Harriet that Percy and Mary finally wed - a couple of weeks after Harriet's death.
 - Claire would birth her daughter to Bryon, that following February. In September, Mary would give birth to her third child, Clara.
 - I've kinda lost track of who's kid is who's here.
- By the summer of 1817, *Frankenstein* was finished and Mary would be 18 years old. Given the status of women at the time, the novel was published anonymously, but most people assumed it was the work of Percy.
- Ah. 18. The twilight years. . .
 - However, they were also pursued by debt collectors, firmly a result of Percy, and the Shelleys, along with Claire and her child, would flee to Italy. Claire would hand over her daughter to Byron, in Venice, with the promise to have nothing to do with her.

- Mary, Percy, and Claire would then travel Europe, never settling on a place for long. What would be an interesting experience for most was soured, however, by the deaths of the children. Clara, the youngest, died in 1818. William in June 1819.
- That November, Mary would have her fourth child, Percy Florence, but remain haunted for the rest of her life.
- While there is even more intrigue in their journeys, I want to fast forward a bit here. By 1822, Mary and Percy were on the rocks and their relationship was strained by Percy's nature and apparent relationship with yet another woman, while Mary was pregnant. She would later miscarry, and rather than be there for Mary, Percy spent more time with his new beau.
 - In [July of 1822](#), Percy, accompanied by Edward Ellerker Williams, and Captain Daniel Roberts took a shiny new boat off the coast of Italy. After a stop to meet with Byron, the three men would sail back home with a boat boy named Charles Vivian aboard the [Don Juan](#), named for the satirical poem of the same name by Lord Byron.
 - I. . . I feel like poor Charles had a bad time before the end.

- A storm off the coast claimed the lives of the men.

Percy Shelley had died at the age of 29.

- It should go without saying that Mary Shelley, now a widow and great writer in her own right, had endured tragedies that would weaken the resolve of most. Her story isn't quite over, but now I want to turn for a time to the strange and supernatural aspects of her famous novel.
 - However, before that, let's take a break, shall we?

Alchemy and Galvanism

- And we're back. So one thing we should address is the sticky issue of authorship of the novel. It wasn't until around 1823, the release of the second edition of the novel, that Mary Shelley herself was able to claim authorship of her text, as the first edition was anonymous because - gasp - women can't write books. Are you mad?
 - There is a contingent of people, I call them assholes, who contend that a significant portion of *Frankenstein* was the work of Percy. Most likely he had a hand in [editing the tale](#), as he would be an invaluable resource for a writer, being such a prolific writer himself. I feel that suggesting otherwise is disrespectful.

- o I also feel that if he made contributions to the text they were unwarranted, unwanted, and undeniable by her. She was, after all, a woman and Percy was probably standing over her shoulder explaining how a pen worked.
- Now, *Frankenstein* is often [interpreted as being anti-science](#). The notion of something being [frankensteinian](#) is not a positive, after all. What Victor does in the novel may appear to be grotesque and savage to us today, but for the time was science.
 - o I quote Rebecca Bauman's "Mad Science" here:
 - "But these readings not only tend to ignore the emotional core of the novel but also grossly oversimplify the role of science in the story. Science fiction, a genre which *Frankenstein* arguably founded, is not always or often a simple warning to temper scientific exploration with moral caution; rather, it is a complex mode of writing which can be used for purposes both conservative (science is dangerous and we should be afraid of it) and progressive (hop on that rocket and explore the wonders of the universe next door), and every nuanced combination

thereof. Is the novel a warning of the dangers of science—don't muck around with your penetrating fingers into the sacred mysteries of a feminized Nature—or is it a warning to tend to that which you create, however it is created? The novel has surprisingly little science in it.”

- I want to note that I am not contradicting my prior point, here. The principles of reanimation, as understood through alchemy and galvanism, were the science of their time.

- Even then, Baumann does bring up a good point, noting the electricity itself does not really become linked to *Frankenstein* until the stage adaptation of the story in 1930 by John L. Balderston and Garret Fort. However, James Whale's 1931 film adaptation really emphasizes the electrical aspect of the reanimation.

- Didn't Branah's version do it as well?

- In truth, the creature's creation in the text is rather vague.

- In chapter 4 of the text, Victor Frankenstein describes the discovery of the principle of

reanimation as such: "Remember, I am not recording the vision of a madman. The sun does not more certainly shine in the heavens, than that which I now affirm is true. Some miracle might have produced it, yet the stages of the discovery were distinct and probable. After days and nights of incredible labour and fatigue, I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter."

- The actual moment of reanimation is not any clearer in chapter 5, where Victor recalls: "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 I 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."

- What we see is that Mary Shelley is cagey about what this reanimation process is. It's not really important. What we get is some vague notions, and fill in the gaps ourselves. If they even need filling. Victor studies the science of chemistry and has an interest in galvanism.
- He bought the reagent from a traveling doctor. A Doctor Herbert West. . .
 - Honestly, Brian Yuzna's adaptation of *Re-Animator* is a pretty faithful interpretation of what the first edition *Frankenstein* re-animation was like.
 - Chemistry at this time was relatively new as a science, more akin to natural philosophy than the science we know today. The notions of a chemist as a "thing" didn't really start materializing until the 17th century.
 - Prior to that we had alchemy, which will be a subject all its own in a future episode.
 - Making that topic doc longer and longer.
- I should also note that much of *Frankenstein*, despite being science fiction in many ways, is couched in the terminology and style of gothic horror. The way The Creature is addressed and written evokes specters, ghosts, and demons, fitting the works of [Horace Walpole](#) and [Ann Radcliffe](#).

- I just want to remind us that at its heart, this is still very much a ghost story as that was the original intent.
- Now, galvanism wasn't even mentioned in the original text - it was edited into the 1831 edition. Shelley, by the time she began writing the story during that period in Geneva had already had an interest in galvanism as it was a topic of discussion among the group.
 - Percy, being who he was, dabbled in the sciences as a hobby, and was known to have some early equipment. Mary also was friends with [Sir William Lawrence](#), who was censured for his pre-Darwinian evolutionary ideas.
 - Science absolutely pervades the text, but Mary Shelley did a great job not being very specific, which is why the text works so well. We don't need the reason, we just need The Creature. Having a cagey, half-crazed Victor explaining it and refusing to explain the sin just makes it work.
 - It's also the fucking BEST thing to do if you aren't solid on the science anyway.
- Regarding galvanism, however, the term is introduced anachronistically in the text. The text is presumably set

in the late 1770s, but the principle of galvanism wasn't really "discovered" until 1791 by Luigi Galvani.

- Galvani's experiments, from the 1780s and 1790s, involved lots of dead frogs. A 1792 plate titled *De viribus electricitatis in motu musculari commentarius* shows the process of touching a frog's leg with a copper probe, resulting in the leg twitching.
- Galvani assumed that this was a form of animal electricity. What was really going on here was an early form of a chemical battery.

■ Ever heard of [a Baghdad Battery](#)?

● That's a mixture of rum and Arak, isn't it?

- Of course, early science was a fucking mess, and there were so, so many dead frogs. Kittens, too.
 - From Baumann, again: "Some of the experiments that took place during this time were more horrific than anything from the pages of Shelley's novel. Frogs were sacrificed in scores in the name of science. Kittens were decapitated or had their brain cavities filled with silver and zinc and then made to leap and dance with electrical charges. Victor's reference to "tortur[ing] the living animal to animate the lifeless

clay" suggests that he may have performed such experiments.

- This was the handiwork of many, but among them was Giovanni Aldini, the nephew of Luigi Galvani. Giovanni didn't stop there, however. In 1803, he performed a galvanic experiment on the corpse of [George Forster](#), a man who had been convicted and executed for drowning his wife and child.
 - Again, from Bauman: "Those who witnessed the experiment (and these endeavors were often pieces of theater as well as science) were horrified when the dead man's eye popped open and arm rose up as if to wave hello."
 - We don't have time to get into the "execution culture" of the 17th and 18th centuries. Let me put it this way: schedules were published, and people would show up to watch people die.
 - Quoting from [The Malefactor's Bloody Registry](#):

"On the first application of the process to the face, the jaws of the deceased criminal began to quiver, and the adjoining muscles were horribly contorted, and one eye was actually opened. In the subsequent part of the process the right hand

was raised and clenched, and the legs and thighs were set in motion."

- Another case; in 1818, Scottish physician Andrew Ure [experimented on the corpse](#) of yet another murderer, Matthew Clydesdale.

- Quoting Baumann here, quoting another source, Roseanne Montillo:

- "Clydesdale was so horrified at the addition of dissection to his sentence that he tried (and nearly succeeded) to kill himself in his cell. He slashed his neck and wrists, but they were sewn up just well enough for him to be summarily hanged. Ure cut open the corpse's neck and inserted what he called a "minor voltaic battery," with one end on the spinal marrow and the other on the sciatic nerve. When the battery was turned on, the results were astounding. The corpse twitched and shuddered as if from cold. The chest heaved and, as Ure himself reported, "every muscle in his countenance was simultaneously thrown into fearful action; rage, horror, despair, anguish, and ghastly smiles united their hideous expression in the murderer's face." His fingers then moved "nimble, like those

of a violin performer,” and “he seemed to point to the different spectators, some of whom thought he had come to life”

- This brings us to our next topic: stealing bodies for fun and profit.

◦ Weren't you guys trying to convince me two fucking weeks ago that we aren't a terrible species?! JESUS CHRIST!

Bodies For Sale

- There was a fuzzy boundary between life and death in 200 or so years from the 1700s into the 1800s. A lot of it was the result of a rapidly growing understanding of the mechanics of the body, combined with fucked up experiments to understand where life ended and death began.
 - Morally and educationally, it sometimes felt like the Wild West. It was often unregulated, lawless, and profitable to source bodies for science if you didn't mind getting your hands dirty.
 - Or someone else's hands. Once they're done with them.
- This, of course, is all over Mary Shelley's novel.

- Do you remember what Victor's principal concern was with gathering the body parts he needed for the creature?
- From chapter 4 of the novel: "Nor could I consider the magnitude and complexity of my plan as any argument of its impracticability. It was with these feelings that I began the creation of a human being. As the minuteness of the parts formed a great hindrance to my speed, I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make the being of a gigantic stature, that is to say, about eight feet in height, and proportionably large. After having formed this determination and having spent some months in successfully collecting and arranging my materials, I began."
- Now, we will be laying the foundation here for a future episode about the theft of corpses and early anatomy schools, among which I want to discuss [Burke and Hare](#). Do you guys know anything about these two gentlemen?
- Thanks to Last Podcast, and Our Fake History, yes!
 - The basic version of their story is that they would commit a series of murders to supply local medical schools [in Edinburgh](#) with corpses for anatomical studies.

◦ I mean, why wait if you're an go-getter?

- One other thing we should mention is the fact that so much of this experimentation was the result of people trying to figure out how people who were presumed dead were coming back to life in the first place.
 - There was a very rote understanding of the mechanics of the body, and the whole approach was to understand the body as a machine and why it seemed to sometimes kick back on.
 - This was particularly common with drownings as there are a lot of historical records that discuss people who were declared drowned but would later come to in all sorts of fucked up circumstances, such as [in their coffins](#).
 - When we eventually cover vampires, we'll discuss a lot of this strange pattern of historical records of the seemingly dead returning to life. This resulted in a whole cottage industry of devices and techniques to provide the dead with a way to signal they were alive.
 - For example, we'll talk about the creation of the safety coffin.
 - Yep. Bells, megaphones, the tortured scraping of fingernails on wood.

- I mean, if we want to draw other literary parallels, Edgar Allen Poe wrote several stories about people being buried alive. Literally, one is titled "The Premature Burial."
- So a lot of this ambiguity of who was dead or not does play out, thematically, with Mary Shelley's novel. Victor's methods, as fucked as they were, were not outside of the presumable norm, nor what his search for that spark of existence because so much of the understanding of the function of life was considered in those very terms.
- But for a second, let's take a break.

Mad Science

- When we think of the concept of a "mad scientist," what is one of the first things that pops into your head?
- Ed Wood's film making process.
 - I am sure we can name a dozen examples, but one that nearly always comes up is Victor Frankenstein. Granted that this is more because of the influence of James Whale's 1931 film, but I'd argue that Victor Frankenstein of the novel also serves this role pretty handily.
 - I mean, the guy did build a dude.

- Part of *Frankenstein's* adaptations is a technological edge that isn't present in the book but works its way into countless retellings and interpretations and conveys an apprehension of society to the darker side of technology and science.
 - We'll probably have a new "Frankenstein" movie in the next two years with a clumsy metaphor about the dangers of unregulated artificial intelligence, for example.
 - FrankenGPT.
- With all the swapping of body parts and fitting corpses together like a fucked-up jigsaw, I would be remiss if we didn't at least bring up the topic of [Allotransplantation](#).
 - Do you guys know what that is?
 - Nope.
 - It has practical applications, of course, but let's talk about brain-swapping.
 - Yes, we're entering MST3K territory. This is the idea behind *The Brain That Wouldn't Die*.
 - The concept of [organ harvesting](#), brain swapping, and more makes up like 40 movies shown on the show. Hell, we can even talk about [xenotransplantation](#) in that regard.

- Stealing body parts and organs and shoving them somewhere else is one of those weird pop-cultural elements that we can trace back directly to Mary Shelley's book, which is pretty fun to think about.
- With that said, I think Allotransplantation is something we can talk about in a larger weird science topic, so I don't want to dive too far into it, mainly because the connection here is just a tenuous one regarding mad science, as inspired by popular readings and interpretations of Mary Shelley's story.
- So, again, this is more related to how Shelley's story has been interpreted over the centuries, but The Creature is often [depicted as a cyborg](#).
 - What is it that you gentlemen understand about what a cyborg is?
 - Silverhawks.
 - This is where my lit major comes in, and I am fighting the urge to talk about Donna Haraway's '[Cyborg Manifesto](#)' at length.
 - Haraway's notion of the cyborg is primarily an apparatus to understand and challenge perceptions of feminism through a socialist lens.

■ Do fucking WHAT now?

- At heart, Haraway's essay explores three major transgressive boundaries and how the nature of these transgressions leads to questioning binaries that we have come to expect and internalize in life.
 - These boundaries are human/animal, human/technology, and physical/non-physical.
- This larger cyborg theory is also fitting in understanding Mary Shelley's creature given Shelley's background and own perspectives at the time. However, there are also [strong arguments](#) that the creature may not necessarily even work as an example of Haraway's cyborg. It's complicated.
- There is a whole basket of bees surrounding this essay, as with any good essay worth studying, so I just cannot get into it here. We don't have the time for that, nor have I had the time to fully reacquaint myself with it since studying, like, 4 years ago.
- Like, fucking post-humanism, man. It's a lot.

- So when we talk about the Creature being a cyborg, it kind of depends on which version you're talking about and what your interpretation of a cyborg is.
- If anything, he's a meat cyborg which makes me want to start grafting ham onto Mike as an experiment.
 - But, since we keep adding potential episode topics down the line, I feel like we can throw cyborgs in there. Why the hell not?

The Later Years of Mary Shelley

- There is still a lot I could talk about here. I haven't even brought up connections to the expeditions of the Northwest Passage, which [frame the novel](#). This is another topic we might eventually cover as there are some possible supernatural and weird elements related to it.
 - But for now, let's turn back to Mary Shelley.
- Things did not get much easier for Mary Shelley after the death of her husband. She continued to write and publish, and eventually, it became known that *Frankenstein* was her work and not that of Byron or Percy.
 - But we should take note that the story of *Frankenstein* is also haunted by the specter of [dead children](#). Death haunted Mary Shelley, and the tale of an unwitting

parent who abandons his child, grotesque as it is, is a strange mirror to her own loss and desire for children taken from her too soon.

- From Ruth Franklin's ["Was 'Frankenstein' Really About Childbirth?"](#):

- "not only was Mary Shelley pregnant during much of the period that she was writing Frankenstein, but she had already suffered the birth and death of an infant. Unsurprisingly, she was tormented by the loss: A journal entry in 1815 reads, "Dream that my little baby came to life again; that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire, and it lives." The echoes of Frankenstein—in which the scientist, who hopes to "infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet," at last sees it open its eyes and breathe—are unmistakable. And the birth of the "creature," as he calls it at first, occurs only after "days and nights of incredible labor and fatigue"; later he refers again to the "painful labor."
- Should I tell a joke now or. . .

- By the time she wrote her introduction for the 1831 edition of the novel, Mary Shelley had survived six pregnancies and the death of four children. How could these things not haunt her and inform the story?
 - Also, by this time, Percy, Byron, and Polidori were all gone.
 - They were daisy chained in one coffin.
 - Frankenstein is a strange time capsule in many ways. Through its eventual revisions by Mary Shelley, it reflects a rapid change in society and how radically her life had changed 30 or so years from when she wrote it.
 - It's the Star Wars Special Edition of classic lit.
 - There was inevitably a period of depression following the death of Percy. However, the pain did fade enough to where she would continue to write and edit, often collecting and releasing the posthumous work of loved ones, such as Percy and her father, William Godwin.
- Because we can't have nice things for successful women, Mary dealt with a series of blackmailers in the 1840s. Notably, she would buy a series of letters purportedly

written by herself and Percy Bysshe Shelley from a man who claimed to be the illegitimate son of the late Lord Byron.

- I'm sorry but if a couple has private letters about sniffing each other's farts, I mean, they're married. Who cares?

- I can't stress enough how much Mary loved Percy and how committed she was to defending his legacy. We'll get into the ultimate expression in a few moments.

- Mary's final years were wracked by illness. She would suffer from headaches and paralysis, so debilitating that it would keep her from reading and writing. And in 1851, she died from what was likely a brain tumor.

- God damn.

- However, death would not be a reprieve from indignity for the late, great Mary Shelley.

- Her wishes to be buried near her mother and father were ignored, and instead, her son Percy Florence and his wife chose to bury her near their home.

- They would eventually exhume and bury Mary's parents near her, near their home, but just... like... bury her near her parents like she originally asked, Jesus Christ.

■ I kinda either want to be buried in the woods wrapped in a shroud or eaten.

- Secondly, upon her death, Percy Florence took to sanitizing the image of his mother to fit into this Victorian era. After all, Mary Shelley did not fit the traditional and expected role of women.
- Her surviving family and social circle strove to censor elements of her biography and history, which ultimately did a couple of centuries of damage to her reputation, masking how radical and revolutionary a figure she was.
- Thankfully, today, we have a more complex and rounded picture of this remarkable author. For a long time, there was a tendency to view Mary Shelley as Percy Shelley's wife and author of *Frankenstein*... and that was it. Who she is, and our understanding of her remarkable life has significantly expanded in the last half-century, and we are all the better collectively for it.
- I honestly didn't know the extent of her career until the last ten years or so, so it's good that we're finally getting a whole picture.

- To wrap all of this up, I want to bring up one poignant, unusual anecdote.
 - As with most of her adult life, this story about Mary is linked heavily to her relationship with Percy, and I think serves as the ultimate image of how deeply she cared for him.
 - While going through the personal effects of Mary Shelley, following her death, Percy Florence and his wife discovered a lockbox. In it were locks of child hair, and a curious artifact... the calcified heart of Percy Shelley, wrapped in a copy of his poem, "Adonais."
 - Upon the discovery of the bodies from the wreck of the Don Juan, Lord Byron, Edward Trelawny, and Leigh Hunt opted to cremate the recovered remains. This was partially due to [Italian quarantine laws](#), but also probably because it was dramatic as fuck and these people loved their poetic drama.
 - It seems that cremation was not enough to erase the traces of Percy from this world, however, it appears that his heart survived the process. One theory is that a bout with tuberculosis was part of the reason the heart didn't quite burn away.

- Leigh Hunt, seeing the unburnt heart, would reach into the pyre to claim it, burning himself in the process. The heart would eventually be given to Mary, whose son, Percy Florence, later [discovered it](#) following her death.

◦ I cannot stress enough how bad ass this is.

Wrapping Up

- And with that, we've reached the end of our foray into the weird life and times Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and her iconic tale of *Frankenstein*.
- What did you guys think?
- I think that women have always had a MASSIVE role in the world of genre fiction and the most recent attempts to downplay that is stupid. Know who one of the most prolific Star Trek screenwriters was? D.C. Fontana. She was a woman and used D.C. so people wouldn't reject her scripts. If you cut women from sci-fi, fantasy, and horror you don't have those genres.