

Program: The Incredible Story Behind Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

Speaker: Richard Gunderman, MD, PhD, Chancellor's Professor, IU School of Medicine

Introduced by: Jerry Kurlander

Attendance: 146

Guests: Larry Wilson, Colleen Mestichelli, Peggy and Greg Sabers, Becky Lomax, Sarah Roberts, Madelyn Smith

Scribe: Larry Hutchison

Editor: Bill Elliott

Our speaker today was Dr. Richard Gunderman MD, PhD from the Department of Radiology and Imaging Sciences, Indiana School of Medicine. The title of his talk was "The Incredible Story of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein". Dr. Gunderman dispelled the idea that Frankenstein was a mere horror story and explored a deeper meaning of what the book was about.

As background, he examined the family and cultural environment of Mary Shelley which led up to the publishing of her literary masterpiece. Her parents were members of the intellectual community, both being well known for their accomplishments. William Godwin, her father, was a journalist, political philosopher, novelist and was closely associated with the Utilitarianism movement. Her mother was Mary Wollstoncraft, a writer, philosopher and feminist. She may very well be considered the first feminist, having authored "A Vindication of the Rights of Women", the first work of its kind and still widely read today. The circle of friends that Mary Shelley's parents had included Aaron Burr, Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and possibly the poet John Keats. One of the events that most assuredly would have shaped Mary Shelley's thinking was that her mother died eight days after her birth, and she was therefore half orphan.

Mary Shelley was married to Percy Shelley at the young age of sixteen, and he was in his twenties. Percy Shelley was married at the time of the wedding and shortly thereafter his first wife committed suicide. The specter of these socially unacceptable circumstances led the young couple to flee England. In the summer of 1816, they found themselves at Lake Geneva in the company of other young intellectuals hoping to spend their time enjoying the beach and water.

Unfortunately, the weather in that year was wretched, having been impacted by the explosion of Mount Tambora, the largest volcanic eruption in history. To compensate for the lost time of enjoying the weather, the group took to reading and discussing ghost stories. Eventually they ran out of books of this kind and Lord Byron challenged each person to write a ghostlike story that could be discussed by the group. For Mary Shelley's part, what resulted was Frankenstein. What was thought of as a trivial time filler has in the subsequent 200 years resulted in numerous movies, novels and television programs, and the word Frankenstein today is readily recognized around the world.

Pressed to produce a story to entertain her peers, Mary Shelley created a protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, an individual that had recently lost his mother to death. Wrapped in grief, he is driven to create life, which of course if he did, would give him God like power and all the benefits he perceived went along with this power. He thought a new type of living being would recognize him as the creator and lead to his worship. Of course Frankenstein came to believe that he had created a monster, a monster lacking character, wisdom and humility. And while Frankenstein through intense concentration on chemistry had produced a creature, he had not produced life or anything like a human. Not only did he find the creature repulsive and was unable to convey any attraction to the monster, Frankenstein had become dehumanized and in the process destroyed himself.

Dr. Gunderman ended his talk with the thought that while, in this modern world, we may think we are capable of creating eternal life, and quite possibly can, we need to think deeply about do we really want to do that? The consequence may be the forfeiture of humanity and the creation of a world of monsters.



DR. Gunderman