MARY SHELLEY, *FRANKENSTEIN* (1818):
SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATING A DISCUSSION
by Corinna Treitel, Department of History, Washington University in St. Louis

The Common Reading Program has selected Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* for the Class of 2021. First published in 1818, the novel will soon turn 200 and our university will be celebrating with a series of events that begin this fall and run through the end of 2018 ([http://pages.wustl.edu/frankenstein200](http://pages.wustl.edu/frankenstein200)).

The novel is an excellent fit for our university in at least two ways. First, it raises enduring questions about the mutual relations of science and society. Second, it offers an excellent opportunity to reflect on otherness as experience and social process. Below, I lay out suggestions on how to develop these themes. Because readers come to *Frankenstein* with different experiences and the novel is protean enough to accommodate many readings, however, don't be surprised if discussion goes in an unexpected direction!

GETTING WARMED UP. There are a couple of ways to open discussion. One is to pose "deprogramming" questions that ask participants to reflect on the differences between what they thought they knew about the novel and what they found when they read it. Another is to solicit responses to the novel's two most relatable characters: Victor Frankenstein and the creature.

- Deprogramming questions: Before reading *Frankenstein*, what did you expect the novel to be about? As you were reading it, how did the novel confirm or defy your expectations? What surprised you the most about your reactions?
- Character questions: Who is the real monster in this novel? Explain your answer.

TWO POSSIBLE DIRECTIONS. The warm up questions will give you a sense of which direction your group wants to go. Below, I lay out questions for two likely directions. One focuses on the mutual relations of science and society. The other tackles questions about otherness. Note also that I suggest specific chapters to highlight for each option.

1. Science / Society (pay attention especially to Volume I, chapter III):
   - Why did Frankenstein aspire to create life artificially? Should he have done these experiments? Were his aspirations defensible as "good science"? Why or why not?
   - If creating life artificially was not the problem, how do we explain what happens after the creature comes to life?
   - Should we presume to use science to create new life forms by artificial means?
   - What are the consequences and responsibilities that come with saying yes or no?

2. Identity / Otherness (pay attention especially to Volume II, chapters III-V):
   - Where do you see the creature acting in very human ways?
   - Why / how does it nonetheless become a monster? How does it come to know itself as a monster? See especially the last five paragraphs of chapter V.
   - What does the creature teach us about how it feels to be a monster? How do monsters act? Is this monster justified in acting as it does?
   - How does this novel help us think about "monsters" and otherness today?
WRAPPING UP. I suggest reserving a few minutes at the end to summarize and reflect on the discussion. You could do this simply by asking participants to spend one minute reflecting privately on what they most want to remember about the discussion and then going around the room to share responses. Another approach would be to ask participants how they would rewrite the story and why. For either option, be prepared to hear a variety of responses. The point is not to agree on a single reading of the novel, but rather to create a shared sense of what participants have learned about the novel and themselves through group discussion.