

THE VICTORIANS IN PHOTO, TEXT, AND FILM

RECEPTION PAPER ASSIGNMENT

Criticism is prejudice made plausible.

-- H. L. Mencken

GENERAL OVERVIEW

The questions we will examine in class over the coming weeks will constitute the basis of various ways of reading *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Dracula*; broadly speaking, we will talk, in class, about the following:

Close Reading: A close reading of a novel involves doing exactly that: performing careful, selective readings of certain parts of a book.

Through our in-class discussions of *Frankenstein*, for example, we will consider a thematic approach to the novel that involves close reading: we will analyze Shelley's use of text and textuality to "authenticate" her characters and her narrative to her Victorian reading audience.

This thematic approach will require close textual reading and an analysis of the larger meanings that arise out of such reading.

Nineteenth-Century Reception Approach: An examination of a site of nineteenth-century reception involves examining materials related to the novel that are contemporaneous with the novel's publication and coming to conclusions about what those materials say about how Victorians "received" the novel.

Another *Frankenstein* example: the first reviews at the back of the Norton edition of *Frankenstein* detail how certain critics felt that the novel was "strange," "inartistic," and "rude" while others felt it was "powerful." In turn, when we discuss these aspects, we will link these general characteristics to a larger cultural debate that was happening at the beginning of the nineteenth century: namely, whether texts were "romances" or "novels" and what a reader could expect to learn from either sort of book.

So a contemporary historical approach to a text often engages reviews of that text. In addition, a contemporary critical approach might include an examination of other poetry, prose, or letters by Mary Shelley and, perhaps, Percy Shelley or Gordon, Lord Byron with the aim of discussing how these additional materials impact the Victorian reception of *Frankenstein*.

Or one could think about contemporary context in an even broader manner, doing research, perhaps, on the British slave trade (which was still alive and well in 1818) and applying one's findings about Victorian sentiments over slavery and/or British imperialism to the novel's depiction of the monster. A similar critical act could involve reading about the British movement for Woman's Rights at the end of the eighteenth-century and applying that knowledge to the novel's constructions of Elizabeth and Justine and/or to Shelley's position as a woman writer. Other historical movements that impacted the contemporary reception of *Frankenstein* include: the notion of the "sublime," introduced by a philosopher named Burke, that altered the reading and writing practice of literature for most British authors at the end of the eighteenth century; the Culture of Revolution that occurred due to the French and American Revolutions in the 1770s and the 1790s; or discussions about Eugenics, the Working Class, and/or prostitution that would have had a direct impact on how a Victorian would have "read" or "received" the monster.

All of these approaches bring together a certain knowledge of the contemporary, historical context in which the novel was published and apply this knowledge to the reception history of a novel.

Modern-Day Reception Approach: An analysis of modern-day moments of reception involves looking at current reinterpretations or transformations of the novel into new mediums. The clips from the two 1930s film adaptations of *Frankenstein* will enable us to discuss how James Whale, the director, remade the novel into an imagistic (rather than narrative) text that “spoke to” issues in American culture surrounding the Great Depression, WWII, the Nazi regime, and the still-prevalent theory of Eugenics.

The key to a modern-day reception approach is to think critically about current adaptations of the work (be they films, cartoons, other novels, songs, websites, a line of sportswear, etc.) and to consider how the modern-day moment influences the way the characters—as well as the Victorian era as a whole—are depicted.

ASSIGNMENT PARAMETERS

Here, then, are the parameters I want you to follow for your assignments:

1. You must choose one of the five “true” Victorian novels we’re reading this semester (*Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Alice in Wonderland*, or *Dracula*);
2. You must choose three other “texts” that “receive” this novel (for instance, three nineteenth-century reviews, or a twentieth-century movie and two reviews of that movie); note that a movie counts as a “text” and that YOU MAY NOT USE THE FULL-LENGTH MOVIES WE WILL BE WATCHING AS A CLASS to count toward your three additional texts, although you should feel free to include a discussion of one if it helps you talk about your other instances of reception;
3. You must perform well-constructed and well-argued close readings of very specific scenes in the novel as well as scenes and/or passages in your other three texts; and
4. You must choose either a contemporary reception approach OR a modern-day reception approach and analyze your three additional sources as moments of cultural reception; your close readings should enrich and inform either your historical or modern-day analysis.