

## The Influence of Seventeenth Century Philosophers on Romanticism

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### INTRODUCTION

The influence of philosophers of the seventeenth century on Romanticism encompasses cross-curricular studies in British literature, history, and the humanities, particularly for the college-bound students. The theme of this curriculum unit is on the historical context in which the philosophers and authors worked and how one generation influenced another. The other focus is on the tendency for one movement to cause a pendulum-swing in the opposite direction, from the Rationalism and the Enlightenment to Romanticism. The philosophers that are included in this unit are: Renee Descartes, Sir Isaac Newton, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, Sir Francis Bacon, John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, and La Mettrie. While there are other Romantic authors that were influenced by the philosophers, this curriculum unit will concentrate on William Blake and Mary Shelley. Blake was quite outspoken in his works about his disagreements with John Locke, Frances Bacon, and Sir Isaac Newton. I will elaborate later. An interesting study, particularly to the student interested in medical science, is the exploration of Blake into materialism and his artistic renderings of the human form. Blake's detailed, anatomically correct drawings can incorporate science and art into the discussion. The influence of philosophy on the Romanticism will also focus on Mary Shelley. The study of materialism in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* will be a good lesson in concordance with La Mettrie's "Man Machine." Shelley's novel and William Blake's poetry are taught in the senior curriculum; Hobbes can be added to the discussion on mechanism. Since I am a senior English teacher, the curriculum unit will be beneficial to advanced- and honors-level students that are college-bound. The lessons can be modified to teach all levels of British literature. The information about the philosophers will be an adequate overview with the basic notions covered, so that the students can be introduced to the philosophical aspects of literature as well as the restrictions that the historical time period placed on the great minds of the Enlightenment philosophers.

This curriculum unit will serve a dual purpose. First, it will make a connection to the students that no man lives in a vacuum. Men are inspired by or disagree with their predecessors and that is often reflected in their work, whether it be literature, which is my focus, or another field of study, such as history or science. The unit will also be divided by philosophers for the history and humanities teachers that may not be interested in the literature aspect. This curriculum unit is taught in the fall with *Frankenstein* and in the spring since the Romantics are taught at that time and since British literature follows chronologically in the textbook. As seniors, this is the year to question and gain confidence in one's opinions. It will help the students to read about well-respected philosophers and authors and how they asserted their ideas and opinions. Seniors should be learning that ideas and philosophies are extremely complex and that philosophy can't be taught in-depth in an already overloaded British literature curriculum; however, it may just give the students a taste of a discipline that they can pursue in college. My advanced seniors study the seventeenth century in December and begin the spring semester with the Enlightenment. We focus on the eighteenth century during the fourth six weeks, and then the students work on an

elaborate Romantic Poets project that culminates at spring break. Student-directed activities are important in a high school classroom, and the ideas presented in philosophy encourage discussion and perhaps writing activities in order to examine those ideas. First, it is important to define Romanticism and give a brief overview of each of the philosophers and writers.

## **ACADEMIC SETTING**

Finding innovative ways to teach literature that is two hundred years old is a challenge, especially in the spring of the students' senior year. Making the subject matter relevant to their lives helps. I have taught high school English for seventeen years. Bellaire High School has a large urban culturally diverse student body, and the expectations for student performance is competitive. One of the goals for each student in the senior English curriculum is to be able to write a college-level MLA formatted research paper. Building confidence in each student's own thinking skills is ongoing. The seniors in the advanced academic program are highly motivated, and all but a few attend college after graduation.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Philosophers**

The philosophers are listed alphabetically so as not to imply that the first one is more important than the next and so on. A lesson to preview the definitions of Rationalism, Empiricism, and the Enlightenment may help the students to understand the prevailing mindset of the philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The following overviews are hardly sufficient to do justice to the philosophies and discoveries of these renowned men. Further research may be required by individual students or the entire class in order to truly understand the ideas and why they were so profound almost four-hundred years ago. Several influential philosophers, such as Rousseau and Kant, influenced great Romantics like Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Percy Bysshe Shelley; however, it was necessary to narrow down the curriculum unit in order to concentrate on the philosophers that influenced Mary Shelley and William Blake. Influence is a reaction against an established system as in Blake's case.

### ***Sir Francis Bacon***

Sir Francis Bacon appears in some high school British literature textbooks. Neil Postman states that Newton and Locke were the Fathers of the Enlightenment and Bacon was the grandfather. His theme was "Knowledge is Power" (Jones 73).

The essay "Of Studies" is probably chosen by the editors of textbooks since cheating scandals and plagiarism are ever increasing. Bacon's essay "Of Truth" may lend itself well to a classroom discussion regarding these matters. The following information about the two essays serves as a synopsis that requires further reading of the essay and/or further research on the subject.

"Of Studies" introduces a paradox in his philosophy of education and that is an opportunity for the class to contemplate the three ideas that he states: "To spend too much time in studies is sloth; to use them too much for ornament is affectation; to make judgment wholly by their rules is the humor of the scholar" (443). The first line piques the curiosity of high school students, which is the idea that to spend too much time studying is sloth. The importance of balancing work with play and other obligations is very topical in the senior classroom with students less than a year away from going to college and relying on their own self-discipline and balance of responsibilities. The necessity to experience as well as to study is a lesson that transcends English class.

Bacon's opinion about books, how some "are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested" ("Of Studies" 444) is an excellent opportunity for a teacher to lead a class discussion on what makes a good book, what books should be taken seriously, which

are for entertainment, etc. At least once a year a student will inquire as to why certain authors are selected as the canon of literature. The same can be argued as to who are the most influential philosophers and why their ideas matter in their time as well as in the present.

Written in 1601, “Of Truth” answers the question, “What is truth?” (Bacon 1) He states that the light of sense was created and last came the light of reason. Punishment is Bacon’s warning against “the wickedness of falsehood” (2).

“Many scientists who followed Bacon...even Newton--did not view science in the same way. The science they created was almost wholly concerned with questions of truth, not power” (Postman 27).

### ***Renee Descartes***

The last work by Renee Descartes, “The Passions of the Soul,” is profound in its impact on subsequent philosophers. His stress on the soul and its integral connection to the body lends itself well to the questions raised in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. For instance, Article XVIII that addresses desires, Article XXV that refers to perceptions that relate to the soul, and Article XXXIV that explains how the soul and the body act on one another will be referred to in the *Frankenstein* section (Haldane 340, 343, 347).

There are two radically distinct classes of entity in the world, Descartes said. On the one hand, there are minds. Minds think, exercise free will, and live forever. On the other hand, there are bodies. Bodies bounce around in space according to fixed, mechanical principles ... Human beings are special because we alone have minds. We alone are empowered to say: I think therefore I am. The rest of the world is a giant machine ... grinding through a series of states with the iron necessity that characterizes the laws of nature.” (Stewart 164)

This quotation will be referred to later in the Mary Shelley section and the argument as to whether the creature is human or has a soul. The resistance of William Blake to recognize human beings as merely cogs in a machine is repeated in his poetry. In “The Passion of the Soul,” Descartes refers to “the machine of our body” (Haldane 338). Descartes differentiated man from animals by the ability to reason and the rational soul.

His belief that “the mind must be excluded from the mechanical sphere, that it did not obey natural law as did the body” (“Mechanism” 1) is a contrast to La Mettrie, who held that the body is all that there is, including the soul. Descartes’ theory of the soul interacting with the pineal gland and being responsible for thought opened the door to La Mettrie’s materialism, ironic because Descartes believed the soul to be central, while La Mettrie believed that the soul is merely the senses of the body, nothing more. Hobbes held to a form of mechanism as well. “Descartes was in agreement with Bacon and Hobbes only in his dissatisfaction with Scholastic science...Descartes proposed to turn the mind inward upon itself so that it could fasten upon some absolutely certain and self-evident truth” (Jones 159). This belief of seeking truth inwardly ironically appears to parallel Blake’s thoughts on the subject, although Blake explored this belief through his own creation of a myth. The mathematical certainty that Newton, Descartes, and Hobbes espoused was detestable to Blake in that anything that restricted the unbridled imagination was suspect.

### ***Thomas Hobbes***

The following quotation from *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic* by Hobbes illustrates the objective of one of the lessons in this curriculum unit that no one lives in a vacuum and every person is influenced by people that came before him:

It must be extreme hard to find out the opinions and meanings of those men that are gone from us long ago, and have left no other signification thereof but their books; which cannot possibly be understood without history enough to discover those aforementioned circumstances, and also without great prudence to observe them. (Tuck vii)

Hobbes, unlike Descartes, “was able to make sense of the material world outside our minds without bringing in elaborate theological postulates, which fits the secular cast of mind of many modern scientist” (Tuck 60). He agreed with Descartes regarding his proposition, “I think, therefore I am” (52). Materialism will be covered in more detail under La Mettrie. Many of Hobbes’s contemporaries preferred Newton’s scientific ideas rather than the “exploration of intellectual possibilities which were not to be opened up again for another two hundred years” (60). Hobbes’s proposals in regards to the rights of man was a new concept in his time. Teachers that cover politics may be interested in this theory. Stories dealing with “the Noble Savage” may want to delve into Hobbes’s postulates regarding man: “The picture of men as naturally and savagely at war with one another... The state of nature becomes a state of war, savagery, and degradation – of which, Hobbes remarked, ‘present-day Americans give us an example’” (68-69). Other philosophers, such as Spinoza, paid attention to Hobbes’s ideas (70). Free Will can be incorporated into a lesson concerning Hobbes. “The ‘law’ of nature tells us what we *ought* to decide if we are thinking rationally, but the ‘right’ tells us that it is we who have to decide, and that we are naturally and psychologically free to go any way we choose towards the necessary goal of our survival” (73). Hobbes had a theory about taking care of people that are less fortunate. In *Leviathan*, he “argues that the commonwealth must be responsible for the provision of maintenance for the destitute ‘they ought not to be left to the Charity of private persons; but to be provided for, (as far-forth as the necessities of Nature require,) by the Lawes of the Commonwealth’” (82). The idea of community service and charitable actions is topical, especially in the wake of the tsunami and Katrina. This theory lends itself well to a class discussion about government responsibility and ethics.

Another comparison of the past and the present that students may not be aware is the “it was only in Hobbes’s lifetime that Western Europeans became more or less the first people in the history of our planet who could reasonably expect not to face devastating famine at some point in their lives” (Tuck 84). *Leviathan* argues against the popular interest of the ancient Greek and Roman classics during the Enlightenment. Hobbes stated that this led people into “mistaken ideas about *liberty*” (85). He differentiates between rights and liberty.

### **Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz**

Leibniz is the subject of a recent book entitled *The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza, and the Fate of God in the Modern World*. This book is not just nestled away in the philosophy section of bookstores and libraries, but advertised as a Book of the Month Club main selection and displayed prominently in mainstream nonfiction collections of bookstores. Students can realize that learning about history, literature and philosophy of centuries past is relevant to their lives today.

One point of interest and a cross-curricular fact is the coincidence that Leibniz and Sir Isaac Newton each invented calculus independent of one another. The restrictions of raw materials and tools in the seventeenth century prohibited Leibniz from building the binary system computer that he invented, but never built. The first computer was not built for hundreds of years. The idea is that these men were working and living in a time that did not have the learning and technological advances that we have today. The average person can access more knowledge from the Internet on his home computer than all of the great minds of the past half-millennium could even dream of. The dividing factor here is that there is a difference between looking up information that is already available to view and creating concepts and ideas that have not been thought up before.

Then there is the paradox of a philosopher having the idea, but not the technology or raw materials in which to implement these ideas.

Leibniz's metaphysical system may be of interest to the student interested in a philosophy that is "reactive to modernity" (Stewart 16). He did not believe in *tabula rasa* (Kramnick 190). He held that our ideas and our sensations come from the soul and that the soul is somewhat independent (190), a contrast to La Mettrie's viewpoint about the soul.

### *La Mettrie*

The mind and body are the same. La Mettrie represents the philosophy of Materialism; it is well suited as a study of Mary Shelley's novel and William Blake's art and poetry. La Mettrie believed that the soul existed as an action of the body; the body is the only human reality. "The imagination is the soul because it plays all its roles" (15). He was uncompromising in his materialism. He also believed that the loss of one sense increases the force of another and that nature's resources are infinite. Both of these concepts make interesting topics of discussion in the classroom.

La Mettrie's observations are anti-Lockean; there is no *tabula rasa*. He questions the credibility of Locke and he debunks Locke's theory in his essay, "The Machine." His observation that hereditary vices and virtues can be passed on from parents to children shows that he was an early proponent of genetics. The subject of the importance of education can be included in a lesson on La Mettrie because he believed that the imagination combined with education is the generation of the mind. There is a law of nature in man, a knowledge of good and evil, that animals do not have. There can be no soul without an ability for remorse. This statement will be addressed later with the discussion as to whether the creature in *Frankenstein* has a soul.

William Blake and his tirades against man being merely a cog in the industrial wheel, would probably not have agreed with La Mettrie's comparison of the body to a machine. On the other hand, the idea of man being a machine and the body being merely parts, lends substance to the argument that Victor Frankenstein was not being immoral when he created his creature. La Mettrie held the idea that behavior is guided by empathy and that principle is built into our nature; science is generating our morality. His philosophy is relevant in the study of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. In La Mettrie's lifetime, people responded to him in horror. The indelible connection he made of the soul and the body pre-empted the concept of an immortal soul and that was troubling to his contemporaries.

La Mettrie diverges from the mechanism of Descartes and Hobbes. He does not separate the soul from the body as Descartes did; however, he "sought to extend Descartes' views on animals and the human body as a machine to mental states" ("Mechanism" 2). "Mind and (since he did not distinguish between them) soul, was to La Mettrie, nothing more than the action of the body" (2). La Mettrie's philosophy of materialism, that nothing exists but matter and that its movements govern consciousness and will and that the body is the only human reality ("Mechanism" 2) will be discussed later in relation to the creature in *Frankenstein*. La Mettrie's belief that "the explanation of human action and human misbehavior is to be found in bodily function and dysfunction" (4) is a good argument to support the motivation of both Victor Frankenstein and his creature.

La Mettrie's hedonism and belief that organisms had a perfect right to seek enjoyment and enjoyment is pleasure that involves no harm to others ("Mechanism" 5), is topical in the twenty-first century as more and more literature is being published addressing the issue of happiness.

## **John Locke**

John Locke's "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" established "what would become the Enlightenment's dominant conception of the mind: a blank slate on which the sensations provided by sensory experience produce ideas" (Kramnick 185). Locke's main ideas are:

- Idea is the object of thinking.
- All ideas come from sensation or reflection.
- First, our senses ... do convey into the mind several distinct perceptions of things... This great source of most of the ideas we have, depending wholly upon our sense, and derived by them to the understanding, I call, SENSATION. (Kramnick 185-186)

A point that may be interesting to senior students today is what Locke refers to as Reflection: Another set of ideas which could not be had from things without: and such are perception, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, knowing, willing, and all different actings of our own minds... This source of ideas every man has wholly in himself and though it be not sense, as having nothing to do with external objects. (Kramnick 187)

Locke's theory of *tabula rasa*, or the blank slate lends itself well to a class discussion. John Locke believed that "The only information of the senses, experience and observation could provide true understanding of the external world. Scientific knowledge could banish superstition" (Heath and Boreham 7). Elaboration on John Locke is in the William Blake section.

## **Sir Isaac Newton**

According to Gale Christianson, Newton ushered in an age in which "the universe was amenable to scientific understanding" ("Newton's Dark Secrets" 1). He was preoccupied by time and motion. Newton wanted to know how the planets move through space. He became so obsessed by this quest that "for 18 months Newton worked on this question day and night. He barely ate, he barely slept, and he saw no one" (Newton's Dark Secrets" 12). This information is a teaching moment about motivation and dedication for a subject that a person feels passionate about and there is a definite parallel between Newton and Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, who worked ceaselessly on his creation for two years (Shelley).

Sir Isaac Newton's laws of motion "confirmed the regular and ordered nature of the universe" (Heath and Boreham 7). Sir Isaac Newton had his share of antagonists during his lifetime and after. Leibniz strongly disagreed with some of his scientific principles and made comparisons of Newton and Locke (Stewart 274). William Blake also made references to Newton and Locke at the same time. Sir Isaac Newton, while discovering and identifying new concepts, such as gravity, the rainbow spectrum of colors in white light and calculus, still relied on building from the prior knowledge of scientists, such as Galileo and Copernicus. Newton's essay that he wrote in 1704, "Opticks: or, A Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections, and Colours of Light," explains his experiments with prisms (Sypher 525). William Blake deplored Newton's mechanical science because it restricted imagination. I will elaborate in the Blake section.

## **Romanticism**

Romanticism was the movement "in philosophy, literature, and art" (Pinker 369) that emerged as a pendulum swing away from the focus of the Enlightenment on the mind rather than emotion and "since then the emotions and the intellect have been assigned to different realms. The emotions come from nature and live in the body... The intellect comes from civilization and lives in the mind" (369). Postman states that Rationalism and Romanticism are dichotomous (30). The movement was a return to nature unimpaired. The sublime in nature was sought by the Romantic authors, such as William Blake and Mary Shelley. Visiting scenic places, such as the Alps was a way for the Romantics to connect with nature. Mary Shelley visited the Alps and she

wrote her famous novel *Frankenstein* in Switzerland. She wrote about the first confrontation between the creature and Victor Frankenstein taking place in the Alps. In the eighteenth century, the word “romantic” was commonly used. “The emerging Romantic spirit of the 18<sup>th</sup> century England was seen by English Romanticism has been described as a ‘renaissance of the Renaissance’” (Heath and Boreham 4). “Often Romantics acknowledge a dark side, the price we must pay for artistic greatness” (Pinker 369). The Gothic tendencies of the Romantic Movement are an unmistakable ingredient in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.

Nature and creativity were the Romantic focus with an emphasis on emotions and the senses. This focus on the individual did not preclude morality. “Romantics, for all their skepticism, could take heart from examples of moral progress” (Postman 34). Romanticism is usually met with enthusiasm by the senior students because they are coming to terms with their own upcoming independence as they embark on the challenges of life after high school. William Blake exemplifies the independent spirit of Romanticism. I chose this particular poet because of his prolific body of work, his talent as an artist as well as a writer, and my own expertise on the subject. Students recognize when a teacher is enthusiastic about an author or a subject.

### ***William Blake***

William Blake was a Romantic who espoused the ideals of unrestrained imagination. William Butler Yeats referred to William Blake as a “literal realist of the imagination” (Connolly vii). “Romantics believed that the emotions are the source of wisdom, innocence, authenticity, and creativity, and should not be repressed by individuals or society” (Pinker 369). “Blake conceived of the systems of both Newton and Descartes as symbolizing common characteristics which Blake could identify as ‘error’” (Ault 24). Blake didn’t like any restrictions placed on the imagination. “‘Imagination’ takes on a special meaning; for Blake it is the equivalent to the structure of ‘Eternity,’ that is, the primary structural reality by analogy to which the fallen world of nature takes its shape” (29-30). There is no ambiguity in Blake. He was an anti-rationalist. “His only formal education was in art” (Abrams 18). “Blake’s art is so involved with his own identity as a man and an artist, he has been most readily understood by later artists with similar preoccupations” (Beer 304).

Ironically, Blake saw his “anatomical illustrations arising from imagination rather than observation” (Connolly 38). They are drawn so proportionately correct that it appears that Blake is a materialist when he is actually anti-mechanistic. In his famous poem “Jerusalem” Blake states that “He who wishes to see a Vision; a perfect Whole/Must see its Minute Particulars” (91:20-1). Blake’s anti-materialism is not hypocritical in light of the fact that Blake devoted his art and poetry to the study of opposites and contradictions. The limitations of materialism and the all-encompassing imagination can co-exist, although Blake railed against the mechanistic world of Locke and Newton. Northrop Frye stated that form and image meant the same thing to Blake (Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* 15). “Blake was more than a poet who happened to also be a painter. He molded the sister arts, as they have never been before or since, into a single body and breathed into it the breath of life” (Hagstrum 140).

Blake outspokenly disagreed with many of the philosophical ideas that had been embraced by the people of the Enlightenment. Blake disagreed with John Locke’s idea that “‘eternity’ and ‘infinity’ have no meaning for the human being, being ‘obscure’ and ‘undetermined’ hypotheses...Blake on the other hand always held that spiritual vision apprehends infinity as organized form. ‘The infinite alone resides in Definite and Determinate Identity’ (“Jerusalem” 55:64) (Damrosch 131). Blake addressed and criticized the philosophers of the Age of Reason by creating mythological figures. For instance, Urizen is Lockean. “Mythology is the language of the unconscious, of the imagination” (Witcutt 18). “The great value of Blake’s poetry is that it provides a kind of outline of the unconscious mind. Blake explored this strange region more

thoroughly than any before or since, and what is more, he knew what he was doing” (18). Blake believed that “reason, when unaided and un-tempered by poetic insight and humane feeling, turns ugly and dangerous” (Postman 35). He was opposed to Locke and Newton’s belief that the power of reason was necessary in order to understand the universe. His famous illustration of Newton has him bent over, sitting on a rock with a compass in his hand. Blake “abhorred the excesses of the Enlightenment reason which he thought had reduced man to a mere cog in the universal machine” (Heath and Boreham 104). In the poem “Milton,” “Blake seeks repeatedly to deny his Lockean inheritance” (Green). “Blake scorned, even demonized Locke throughout his life... Lockean common sense made humanity less interesting” (Glausser 4). Blake wanted unrestrained imagination, free from worldly restrictions, including the laws of physics and man. “Blake always returns to the human, however. His concern is less with the problems of physics than with the state of man... It is not simply a living universe that Blake wants to restore us to, but a human and visionary one” (Beer 309).

“Blake’s concern with freedom, equally, is of the period that produced the French Revolution; but his thinking on the subject moves steadily further away from political commitment” (Beer 304). In his myth, he envisioned “a shift of emphasis from an apocalypse by revolution to an apocalypse by imagination” (Abrams 20). Blake resented any restrictions placed on the possibilities of the imagination. This apocalypse, rather than being foreboding and negative, was rather “A freeing of man’s senses and results in the recovery of a lost mode of vision that sees a nature which, because it is humanized, is a place where all individuals, united as One Man, can feel at home” (21). Nature is at the forefront of the Romantic philosophy. “He despised obscurity, hated all kinds of mystery, and derided the idea that poets do not fully comprehend what they are writing” (Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* 4). Blake was confident in his own accomplishments as a writer and he knew exactly what he was writing about, even when his audience did not. More often than not, he didn’t have an audience, nor did he need one. He created because he needed to create and he was confident. High school students can learn a lesson from Blake in being self-assured in their voice and not to be so self-conscious about what others might think.

Blake’s literary influence was John Milton, and Mary Shelley made allusions to Milton’s *Paradise Lost* in *Frankenstein*. Exploration of the inner man was tantamount in Blake’s work and it is evident in Shelley’s novel as Victor, the creature, and Robert Walton each delve into his own psyche.

### ***Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley***

I teach Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in the fall. The theme of whether or not the creature has a soul could be explored in the context of Mary Shelley’s education and influence from philosophers/writers that her father and she knew. Percy Bysshe Shelley, Byron, and Coleridge all influenced Mary. Some of the impressions she gained from hearing “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” when she was eight years old may have given her ideas for her eventual novel. Allusion: “But I shall kill no albatross” (Shelley 20). “The deadly weight yet hanging round my neck” (145). Her marriage to Percy Bysshe Shelley certainly influenced her novel and her legacy as the daughter of William Godwin (anarchist Enlightenment philosopher) and Mary Wollstonecraft (pioneer feminist). Mary “wrote a thematic novel of terror which not only is a literary classic but has become a popular myth. Her *Frankenstein* (1817) transforms a story about a fabricated monster into a powerful representation of the moral distortion imposed on an individual who, because he diverges from the norm, is rejected by society” (Abrams 16). She read from her father’s library, and she had conversations with the intellectuals and artists who visited her philosopher father. In the summer of 1816 in Lake Geneva, she participated in a ghost story contest with Lord Byron, P.B. Shelley, and Dr. Polidori. *Frankenstein* is known as a tale of



scientific horror. Victor has been compared to Prometheus (with electricity as the modern fire), (the other title is *The Modern Prometheus*), P.B. Shelley, Adam, and the spirit of science (809).

Satirizing the (almost exclusively male) Romantic creative ego, Mary Shelley addresses the perils of Faustian genius whose experiments acknowledge no limits but those of its own uncertain moral universe. Her novel exposes the dangerously inward-looking state of the Romantic thinker preoccupied with his own consciousness (Heath and Boreham 112).

Through her novel, Mary could vent an anger and violence considered unfeminine in her day (“Mary Shelley” 728). She also understood the passions inherent in the Romantic soul. Victor, as the Romantic hero, according to the character, Robert Walton, had the “full Romantic capacity for creation and destruction” (Shelley 213). His passion, according to Victor, “decided my future destiny” (48). A good discussion topic that also ties into responsibility is the idea of misled passion, in the context of morality – is it wrong (206)?

The imaginative romance is differentiated from the historical romance. *Frankenstein* falls into the former category. The Monster created by Frankenstein illustrates the consequences of our actions. The passion that drives Victor Frankenstein is compared to Newton’s passion in a previous section; however, in Victor’s case the results are disastrous. Descartes also warned us about keeping our passions in check. His treatise, “I think, therefore I am,” makes a good prologue to a class discussion or essay as to the question: is the creature human since he thinks? Quotations from the novel elaborate on the subject concerning the creature’s and Victor’s souls: “There is something at work in my soul that I do not understand” (20); “Irradiated by the soul within” (29); “Soul of Frankenstein” (47). Students should be encouraged to actively read the novel and take notes as they read, especially if they are to site a research paper or prepare for an argument.

La Mettrie believed that the human body was a machine with no soul. La Mettrie’s ideas can spark some interesting discussions on the topic of Victor Frankenstein’s creation. Exploring the idea of the body as machine as well as the responsibility for one’s actions are subjects that tie the theories of La Mettrie and the themes of *Frankenstein* together. Victor takes responsibility for his actions (Shelley 85) and later he says, “My heart often sickened at the work of my hands” (157). “I am the assassin of those most innocent victims; they died by my machinations” (177).

The idea of the creature, or even Victor as the other, an outsider is rich with possibilities. The Romantic notion of the Romantic Savage can be introduced. “The Noble Savage: an adult, but an alien to our world” (Millhauser 2). “Frankenstein’s monster has only the impulses of his nature—which are, to start with, absolutely good. But this mixture of innocence with ignorance was the very point to be exhibited by the Noble Savage or the ‘natural man’” (2). Does the Noble Savage have a soul? Are all men merely machines as La Mettrie proposes? What are other examples of characters that have been outcast? By the time my students read *Frankenstein*, they are already familiar with Grendel from *Beowulf* and Gregor from Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*. Students often secretly, or openly feel like outsiders. Questions such as the following have come up in conversation: “Who and what does society say that I am?” “Am I aware of what others think, or are they aware of who I really am? Whenever the subject of a discussion includes information that is relevant to their own lives, high school students are inclined to pay attention.

Mary Shelley’s novel influenced so many people. The creature in *Frankenstein* is recognized as an icon, perhaps due to exposure of the movies as much as the novel itself.

The Bible influenced John Milton, John Milton inspired Mary Shelley and William Blake, and they in turn influenced future generations. Many senior textbooks contain a portion of “Paradise Lost.” The students may pay closer attention to the poem and the novel, *Frankenstein*, when they are taught in conjunction with one another.

## CONCLUSION

Philosophy has a place and relevance in the English, history, science and math classroom. Many college-bound seniors will be taking a philosophy class, but this curriculum unit is for just in case this is their only exposure to the seventeenth century philosophers and it may just spark enough interest that the students will pursue some aspect of philosophy. The Romantics capture the attention of the individualistic, creative student. Using William Blake's theory from his poem, "Jerusalem," "I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Mans'" (J 10:20), works well in a senior classroom because the young adults are emerging from years of intense peer pressure and learning more about themselves and becoming more autonomous. If a student facing college can learn how to develop a strong sense of self by either reading the philosophy and literature of these great minds, then this is a worthwhile curriculum unit.

## LESSON PLANS

The lesson plans are elaborate and multi-faceted, so it is up to the teacher to decide the time frame. I usually allow several weeks for students to complete group work and presentations are spread throughout a one-week period. MLA research and writing is assigned over a six-week period. These assignments require in-class work and homework. Other subjects in the curriculum are covered during this time; it is the responsibility of the students to learn how to plan and complete the lesson within the time frame.

### Lesson One: Interview and Write about Influential People

#### *Objective*

People don't learn in a vacuum; everyone is influenced by someone or some event in the past. Developing an interview or doing the research is the preliminary to the main objective and that is to develop and write an essay about what the student learned about who or what influenced his life.

#### *Materials*

- Tape recorder or notepad for the interview.
- Word processor or simple writing utensils for the essay

Choose a mentor or a person that you admire most. What characteristics and qualities do you admire about this person and how do you emulate those characteristics. If possible, interview this person; otherwise, create a dialogue and speculate as to how the person may have responded to your questions. Who was the person that your hero admired? Why?

### Lesson Two: Seventeenth Century Philosophers

#### *Objective*

Students become active learners and teachers themselves as they research a philosopher, collaborate on that information with peers and present the information to the class. Then the students will apply their knowledge of MLA format and write a documented essay based on the research.

#### Group Work

Research one of the seventeenth century philosophers to teach to the class. Class discussion: apply the knowledge of that philosopher and analyze the novel, *Frankenstein*, or Blake's poems using the beliefs and ideas of that particular philosopher.

Students may choose to use power-point, videos, or other creative means to get their lesson across.

## Individual Work

Each student will write an MLA documented essay on the information they researched regarding the philosopher.

### **Lesson Three: Creative Writing**

#### ***Objective***

Students will demonstrate knowledge of their subject by presenting it as a creative writing project.

1. Create an alternative ending to *Frankenstein*.
2. Create a mechanical invention or draw a picture to illustrate or demonstrate materialism. This can be a group project.
3. Write a poem or short story using the elements of Romanticism. Include references or descriptions of nature.
4. Keep a Dialectical Journal. Write down quotations, vocabulary words, questions, comments and observations along with page numbers. Some students may choose to purchase a paperback novel and write in the margins or highlight passages. Students that use classroom books are encouraged to place sticky notes with comments on the pages.
5. Compare either Victor or the creature in *Frankenstein* to another character that is considered an outsider.
6. Write about the importance of names and the dignity that a name entails. What is the significance of Victor omitting a name for the creature?
7. Create artwork and a poem.
8. Write a parody or satire based on a Blake poem, *Frankenstein*, or one of the philosophers.

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