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James C. McDonald

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Tutoring Literature Students in Dr. Frankenstein's Writing Laboratory¹

James C. McDonald

Try, if you will, to imagine yourself around a campfire late on a dark night. You are with a group of English literature teachers, and they begin swapping horror stories about their students, some true, others probably apocryphal. One teacher tells of a student who wrote that William Blake's "The Sick Rose" was about the Israeli-Palestinian problem, while another's student concluded that James Joyce's "Araby" took place in France since the story was set in the Cafe Chantant. One professor complains that his entire class missed Stephen Crane's irony and concluded that "Do Not Weep, Maidens, War Is Kind" was a patriotic poem and then mentions that his students have regularly interpreted John Donne's "The Flea" as a poem about abortion. Another professor paraphrases a student essay on "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" that explained that Mr. and Mrs. Prufrock were planning to take a stroll when Mr. Prufrock announced he was as tired as a tonsillectomy patient anaesthetized upon a table. Chills you to the bone, doesn't it, the monstrous things that students do to literature?

These students as well as others with less monstrous but no less problematic literary interpretations often come to the writing center for help composing a literary analysis. This kind of paper poses a different problem for a tutor than most expressive, expository, and persuasive papers. In the course of a conference, a tutor may question the logic, evidence, and accuracy of such papers and challenge students' positions without dismissing what they have written, but working instead with their statements to strengthen

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the papers. But when a student brings in a draft expounding a bizarre interpretation of a poem or a short story, the first inclination is often to unravel the interpretation, abandon the draft, and go back to the literary work with the student to start the paper over. What else can you do with a paper that argues that Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is about Santa Claus? These conferences are often unsatisfying, with the tutor and the student just trying to get through an unpleasant assignment. Even when students leave the writing center with a sounder analytical paper, I wonder whether they leave with a strong sense of ownership of their papers, a real appreciation of the poems or stories they have been working on, any feeling that they have accomplished anything more than satisfying a professor. In these conferences, the tutor often seems caught in the middle, between a student trying to make sense of a strange text in the alien language and forms of literary criticism and a professor with specific expectations of what constitutes an acceptable academic interpretation of that text, expectations that often disallow what sense the student has made of the work.

For various reasons, I find the Frankenstein story a helpful analogy for understanding the relationship of student, teacher, and literary work in an academic community and the difficult role of the tutor in helping to make this relationship work. The Frankenstein analogy injects a sense of things gone awry into the ancient commonplace that a reader brings a text to life, inspiriting it, a commonplace echoed in recent literary theory concerned with the relationship of death to the text. The metaphor of the text as body and the reader as the soul that gives it life is as ancient as Plato's *Phaedrus* and St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians—"The letter kills but the spirit gives life." In his article "*Maranatha: Death and Life in the Text of the Book*," Walter J. Ong, S. J. writes that each reader "resurrects" the text, transforming silent, dead letters to the sounds of life, bringing the text into the life-world of the reader.²

In "Reading, Technology, and Human Consciousness," Ong describes the interpretive process in similar terms, though without referring to the body-soul metaphor explicitly: "Interpreting a text means inserting it somehow into the ongoing conversations you live with. . . . [T]he text has to be related in some way to what the reader knows of actuality, if only by contrast, or it cannot be understood at all" (175). Angela Dorenkamp draws on this essay by Ong in her "Interpretation in a Place Between" to argue that the "aggressive originality" of students' readings often occurs because students are actively connecting unfamiliar literature to what they know and

believe, to conversations taking place in a different culture from the writer's or the teacher's, using the texts "to fill in the interstices of their preconceived . . . constructions," sometimes overriding "textual constraints," ignoring "what did not accord with their visions" (167).

Dorenkamp also draws on the fascinating story of Menocchio, a sixteenth-century Italian miller burned for heresy, whose story is told by Carlo Ginzburg in the book *The Cheese and the Worms*. Menocchio was a puzzle to his inquisitors, for his theology was a strange pantheism unlike any heresy they had ever heard, and he had had no contact with heretics or heretical writings. He argued, for example, that creation was a kind of spontaneous generation with God and the angels arising out of a pre-existing chaos, "like worms out of a putrefying cheese," a conclusion he believed was confirmed by the Bible and other Christian writings (11). Dorenkamp and Ginzburg argue that Menocchio, unusually well read for a peasant but not a part of any established interpretive or academic community, read his amalgam of religious and travel literature in the terms of his rural Italian peasant culture, forming strange but imaginative readings that often neglected important passages of his books but that had a stubborn and wondrous logic of their own and connected strongly to the central concerns of his life.³

Considering the strange readings like those of Menocchio and of many students, the Frankenstein myth works better than a simple resurrection metaphor to describe reading and teaching literature, for each reader brings a foreign spirit to enliven the body of the text.⁴ (Many teachers, unfortunately, would argue an "abnormal brain" indeed.) In this analogy, the body of the monster represents the text itself (an apt symbol for post-structuralists who speak of the text as "a tissue of voices" to describe its intertextuality, for the monster's body parts came from several bodies). The reader or student is the brain, the spirit, or the soul of the monster that gives life to the body of the text. The creature or monster, then, is the reading or interpretation of the text. The Frankenstein story works especially well for describing student interpretations because most versions of the story portray the creature from two points of view. The creature, from one perspective, is an alien, frightening, unnatural, even fiendish being, an affront to humanity and perhaps a threat to civilization. But the other perspective challenges readers and audiences to ask whether their disgust at the creature arises out of their own prejudices and narrow perceptions and imaginations. From this viewpoint the monster becomes a special creature, in many ways more complex, alive, and human even than his creator.

The Frankenstein story offers an interesting (even spooky) analogy to the teaching of literature. Here Dr. Frankenstein is the literature professor who brings together the body of the text and the mind of the student. Like Dr. Frankenstein, the literature professor has expectations of bringing a wondrous being to life, perhaps a subtle and complex interpretation of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," that will lead the student to a deeper understanding of her life and culture. But like Dr. Frankenstein, the literature professor is often horrified when he sees the student interpretation take form and life: "but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart," Frankenstein wrote in Mary Shelley's novel (56). Like Shelley's Frankenstein, a professor confronted with a student interpretation that violates his expectations and standards may simply reject it in disgust and work to destroy it, telling the student to start over. The scientist of the James Whale and Mel Brooks movies, however, suggests an alternative, for he accepted the creature and worked to educate it, to prepare it somehow to take a place in the community. This alternative opposes both a simple acceptance of all student interpretations (which would make the teacher superfluous) and an out-of-hand rejection of student interpretations that violate the standards of literary criticism. It suggests that the teacher should entertain the interpretation initially in some way, perhaps playing Peter Elbow's believing game for a while to discover worthwhile insights in the student's reading, but the teacher must also work with the student and the reading so that it can develop into a reading that relates meaningfully to the student's life and to the concerns of the academic community.

In this story, however, the academic community of literary studies, the interpretive community that Stanley Fish discusses, is represented by the villagers of the Frankenstein movies, the frightened townspeople with torches who form a mob intent to kill the monster or at least drive it from Austria. An interpretive community normally allows for diversity and disagreement in reading a text—but only up to a point. Beyond that point, the interpretive community has a powerful authority to decide what interpretations are allowed and what are not. Like the creature, a strange student interpretation can expect no residence, no sustenance, no caring, no understanding from the community. Student interpretations are not threatened by clubs, of course, and only occasionally by fire, but low grades, angry comments, and ridicule are powerful weapons. If the student interpretation is to survive, it usually must stay hidden from the community, as student interpretations often do, in the equivalent of Frankenstein's castle or the ice caves outside Geneva. Students often find it difficult for their voices to be

heard above the powerful voices of the author and the teacher, despite the best efforts of teachers.

The tutor's role here is a difficult one, even if the student interpretation is not bizarre. As Thom Hawkins writes, a tutor, especially a peer tutor, is both outsider and insider to the academy, a part of and somehow still apart from the academic community. The tutor tries to help student writers from literature courses to make sense of a work—relating the work to their lives—while at the same time negotiating the impersonal, perplexing, and intimidating rules and standards of the university. The tutor attempts somehow to close the distance not only between the student and the academy but also between the student and the literary text. This challenge suggests two possible characters for the tutor in the Frankenstein stories—the old blind man of the novel who offers friendship and nourishment to the creature or Igor, Dr. Frankenstein's laboratory assistant in the Frankenstein movies. Each character is both an outsider and an insider and acts as a potential link between the creature and others.

Igor would be a tutor trying to satisfy the professor, perhaps in response to the professor's referral which explains the professor's understanding of the flaws in the student's interpretation. As Dr. Frankenstein's assistant or apprentice, Igor is an insider in the tiny scientific community concerned with discovering and harnessing the secret of life. Yet clearly Igor lacks the knowledge, power, and prestige of a scientist, and physically he seems to belong more to the creature's world than to the scientist's. His own relationship to the community is fragile and tentative; like a student, he is a part of the community but not necessarily comfortable within it. Even Dr. Frankenstein often fails to notice the importance of Igor to his project and frequently treats him like a go-fer. But Igor is a co-creator with Dr. Frankenstein, literally bringing body and brain together, digging for body parts and stealing brains, and afterward tending to the monster in the laboratory. Igor may take a mechanical approach to his job, tightening a bolt here, adjusting an elbow there, installing a new liver, maybe an extra jolt of electricity, and the creature will be fixed up right. But Igor in many ways knows the creature better than the scientist—he is responsible for feeding the monster, for keeping an eye on him (the assistant is named Eye-gor in Brooks' *Young Frankenstein*), and for recording his development. His relationship to the creature is more personal than the scientist's, if not necessarily more friendly. Igor's success in helping the creature to develop and better understand himself and the world frequently depends on his ability to gain both the creature's and Dr. Frankenstein's trust and respect and to understand each one's desires.

The blind old man De Lacey in Shelley's novel has a somewhat different problem—the creature has come to him on his own, desperate for help. De Lacey also is an outsider and insider, an exile from France but formerly a man of family, wealth, and power, the head of his family but also removed from and ignorant of events in his household because of his blindness. This blindness, however, allows the creature to approach the old man confident that he will see beyond the creature's deformities, and, in fact, De Lacey offers the creature food and shelter and promises to be a friend and advocate for the creature with other members of his family. But since, unlike Igor, the old man knows nothing of the monster's origins and is unable to fully perceive all the problems the creature faces in the community, he is like a tutor working in the dark about what a teacher expects from the student, a problem compounded by the fact of the profound and usually unspoken disagreements among critics and teachers over what constitutes an acceptable interpretation or student paper. In the end, De Lacey is helpless and mute when his family suddenly arrives and drives the creature off. Maybe, given more time to discuss his situation with the old man, the creature and De Lacey could have persuaded the family to befriend the creature—but maybe not. Still, the old man analogy suggests that a friendly, compassionate tutor who temporarily acts blind to the deficiencies of a student interpretation and strives to become a link between the student and the academy could be effective. But the outcome of the story suggests how difficult forging this link could be.

The Frankenstein story, of course, has a variety of endings. Most typically the monster is simply destroyed, as he is in Whale's 1931 movie. In the novel and some movies, he is exiled to the frozen north, or he simply disappears, separated from human society and essentially silenced. In *Young Frankenstein*, however, the creature's mind is joined with Dr. Frankenstein's, and the creature does find voice and a place in the community but is, sadly, a tamer, more domesticated creature than before, wearing glasses and pajamas and reading the financial news as he waits for his wife to come out of the bathroom and join him in bed. None of these endings should be satisfying for those teaching or tutoring students to read and write about literature—merely to destroy or suppress a student's reading or to substitute the student's reading with a safe, acceptable interpretation that may not have any personal significance to the student, the instructor or tutor becoming the writer of the student's text.

To the extent that Dr. Frankenstein is perceived as the creator of the creature, the part that the creature's own mind plays in what the creature becomes goes unnoticed—Dr. Frankenstein “writes” the creature. The

conflict in most versions of the story arises because the creature resists being written by Dr. Frankenstein and insists on going its own way—with the scientist paying heed to its mind and sensitivities, its needs and desires—and the scientist realizes that much of the process of making the creature is out of his control and much messier and more complicated than he had anticipated. This conflict, I think, is analogous to the problems that teachers and students often experience when students write about literature in literature-based composition courses and in introduction to literature courses, problems that frequently send students to the writing center. The tutor too often feels the urge to write the student's paper, to give the student an acceptable interpretation in 30 minutes so that the student will have a paper to hand in the next morning.

Working with these students is a difficult task for a tutor, for the tutor must help students with at least two texts, the student's paper and one or more literary works. The tutor must help students make sense of unfamiliar texts for themselves and learn the rules and conventions that govern reading and writing practices in literary analysis, using those rules and conventions to make sense of the texts. When students write about other writers' texts, they typically try to avoid this complicated process by summarizing the works instead of interpreting and analyzing them, and when they begin to analyze, it is not surprising that their interpretations are often "aggressively original." Of course, tutors need to teach students the conventions and limits for writing analyses and interpretations that are meaningful and acceptable in the academic community. But they also need to extend some of the same courtesies to student interpretations that they extend to the often strange and far-fetched interpretations that they encounter in their classes, in journals, and in historical studies of the ways that different audiences have read particular works of literature—not to accept strange new readings uncritically but to learn what different readers have gotten from a literary work and why.

Much of the practice of critics is to consider alternative readings and meanings of texts that do not necessarily destroy established readings but complicate them and exploit the ambiguity of language and literature. This is a valuable practice in a writing center. Approaching a work from a new perspective allows the reader to make use of parts of an earlier reading, her own or another's, and to critique that reading from the new perspective. A favorite strategy of critics to open up the text is to ask "what if?" What if the narrator is unreliable? What if we consider the events from another character's point of view? What if we apply another definition to a word in analyzing this passage? What if we regard this passage as ironic? Whether we think a student has horribly misunderstood a work or not, we want the

student to critique his interpretation as well as the work, to avoid simple and pat conclusions in analyzing a work, and to continue to question his readings and be open to other possibilities. These standards apply when the student is writing about any text, literary or not.

Other more satisfying endings to the Frankenstein story are possible and do in fact take place in writing centers and classrooms today, seldom easily, when tutor and teacher are able to guide a student toward a reading important personally to herself and meaningful and interesting for others. These successes, I think, occur most frequently when we follow pedagogies that make the student's needs and world the center of instruction, when we resist the urges to hunt down error and to write a student's papers ourselves and instead listen to the student and engage in dialogue. Frankenstein's monster, after all, wanted only to be loved.

Notes

¹A draft of this paper was read at the Conference of the South Central Writing Centers Association two days after Halloween, on All Soul's Day 1990. I thank Maria Burke, Joe Andriano, Herb Fackler, Skip Fox, and Doris Meriwether for their suggestions and stories of student readings. None of them should be held accountable for this creature.

²Passages that connect writing and books with death are so commonplace that the standard books of quotations include whole sections of quotations on this theme. Francis Bacon and George Herbert compared readers to "necromancers" who "ask counsel of the dead." John Milton compared "a good book" to "the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a Life beyond Life." Adelaide Crapsey regarded her book as "my funeral urn," where the reader will "find my ashes," and Charles Lamb called the pages of books the "winding-sheets" of their authors. Other writers have referred to libraries as "the tombs of such as cannot die" (George Crabbe), "the soul's burial ground" (Henry Ward Beecher), and shelves for "mummied authors" (Bayard Taylor). Recently, Paul Ricoeur has written "that to read a book is to consider its author as already dead" (137), and Jacques Derrida that writing "betrays" life and is "the principle of death" (25). Ong writes that a written text has "the immortality . . . of a corpse": "In a written work, the author's words are mortmain. They will never die because when he put them down, he fixed them for good. They are a 'mortification' because writing them down killed them" ("*Maranatha*" 235). Texts here are zombies, simultaneously alive and dead—The Library of the Living Dead.

³Mary Louise Pratt has proposed a “linguistics of contact” to better understand how discourse works among speakers and writers of different communities, “a linguistics that decentered community, that placed at its centre the operation of language across lines of social differentiation, a linguistics that focused on modes and zones of contact between dominant and dominated groups, between persons of different and multiple identities, speakers of different languages, that focused on how such speakers constitute each other relationally and in difference, how they enact differences in language” (60).

⁴My analogy draws freely from different versions of the Frankenstein story—particularly Mary Shelley’s novel and the films directed by James Whale and Mel Brooks.

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James C. McDonald is an assistant professor and Supervisor of the Writing Center at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. He is also the editor of the *South Central Writing Centers Association Newsletter*.