In 1816, Mary Shelley began writing a story that posed profound questions about individual and societal responsibility for other people. To make her point, the young novelist used the scientific advances of her era and the controversies surrounding them as a metaphor for issues of unchecked power and self-serving ambition, and their effect on the human community.

Since that time, Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus has become one of the Western world’s most enduring myths. The story provides a framework for discussions of medical advances that challenge our traditional understanding of what it means to be human.

**Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus**

More than a simple parable of science gone mad, Frankenstein uses scientific themes as a framework for exploring larger political issues of power, responsibility, and justice in society.

**ON A DARK AND STORMY NIGHT**

In her novel, Mary Shelley did not provide detailed descriptions of the process her protagonist, Victor Frankenstein, used when he “bestowed animation on lifeless matter.” But Victor’s references to the power of electricity and his infusion of “a spark of being into the lifeless thing” make clear that Mary, like many of her contemporaries, was fascinated by the boundary between the living and the dead and the scientific search for the principle of life.

Luigi Galvani, a professor of anatomy at the University of Bologna, performed an extensive series of experiments in “animal electricity” or “galvanism” in the 1780s and 1790s.

**Luigi Galvani (1737–1798)**

Artist: Thomas Charles Wageman (ca. 1787–1863)

The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations

Commentaries

Electricitatis in Motu Musculari

Illustration from De viribus Electricitatis in Motu Musculari

Luigi Galvani, a professor of anatomy at the University of Bologna, performed an extensive series of experiments in “animal electricity” or “galvanism” in the 1780s and 1790s.

**The Transformation of a Monster**

Frankenstein and his creature begin to end beyond civilization in the icy regions of the frozen north where the scientist and monster meet their fates.

**The Transformation of a Monster**

Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus, 1818

Author: Mary Shelley (1797–1851)

Engraved by John Boydell, London

Library, University of Pennsylvania

**With feverish excitement, Victor Frankenstein pursues nature to her hiding places. Working alone, he gathers the pieces of bodies he needs from the charnel house and the graveyard to create a living being. Although he finds, his voluntary preoccupation repulsive, he is not deterred from his quest to restore life.**

Mary Shelley gave her monster feelings and intelligence. Only after he is denied human relationships and acceptance by society does he turn to rage, revenge, and murder.
Mary Shelley’s education stressed the development of the imagination; she was introduced to great works of literature, history, and mythology, and studied French and Latin. Her parents, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, were noted progressive thinkers and political theorists.

In Frankenstein, the intelligent and sensitive creature created by Victor Frankenstein reads a copy of John Milton’s Paradise Lost. The monster mourns how he is so unlike the Biblical Adam and is abandoned by his creator.

Contemporary scientific advances raise difficult ethical and policy questions. Although the scientist Victor Frankenstein failed to take responsibility for his misbegotten monster, Mary Shelley has for two centuries offered the Promethean possibility that humanity could make responsible choices.