

Tracing the Legacy: Comparing Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Jennifer McMahon's *The Children on the Hill*

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ABSTRACT

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has become a prominent predecessor for abundant adaptations in popular culture. Although the novel was published more than two hundred years ago, numerous writers have made it their most reference and inspiration. This article aims to investigate the traces *Frankenstein* has left on Jennifer McMahon's *The Children on the Hill* under the argument that the former has served as the source for the latter. Therefore, this research belongs to the literary influence study. Drawing the analysis under the compare and contrast method, this study results in some parts of *Frankenstein* that are recreated in *The Children on the Hill*. Those parts include the description of the creator's life, the trigger of the creation, the creation's process, and its horrible consequences. The result also shows that McMahon's book presents the recreated parts in a more horrifying way, especially about the details of the experiment and the shocking ending when the monster kidnaps many female adolescents to turn them into monsters like her. This study concludes that a monster does not always come in a hideous appearance like what Victor created. However, the monster can also lie dormant within a human's personality, which can bring about terrible destruction when it comes out.

Keywords: monster, revenge, source, inspiration, compare and contrast

INTRODUCTION

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus was first published in 1818 by Mary Shelley. The novel narrates the life of Victor Frankenstein, who was obsessed with creating life, and the consequences that he had to bear for his obsession. Despite its publication more than two centuries ago, *Frankenstein* has been studied in disparate areas of expertise (Crook, 2018) and remains relevant (Cambra-Badii et al., 2020). In the last five years, for example, *Frankenstein* has become the subject of many discussions, such as morality and responsibility (Patowary, 2023), otherness (Kourie, 2023), revenge (Mogea, 2023), the novel's gothic elements (Waham, 2023), and colonial dogmas (Mahdi, 2022).

However, it is undeniable that the most discussed topic in studying *Frankenstein* is how the novel has inspired countless adaptations, either theatrical or cinematic (Lisica, 2022). To name a few, McCormack-Clark (2022) investigates the recurring trends and echoes within contemporary science fiction movies, while others address the novel being the hypertext for novels (Ghazi, 2023; Hosseini et al., 2020; Mahmood, 2021, 2022, 2023; Maleki & Shohani, 2022, 2023; Nasr, 2019; Shamsi, 2021). Nevertheless, all the discussions about *Frankenstein's*

legacy mostly focus on the same novel, which is Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, and rarely address other similar novels.

This study, thus, aims to follow Frankenstein's traces to another work in popular literature titled *The Children on the Hill*. *The Children on The Hill* is written by Jennifer McMahon and was first published in 2022. The novel tells the story of a psychiatrist who experimented on a child's life by stopping her heart to make her dying and then bringing her back to life to give her a new beginning. Told in alternating timelines and points of view, *The Children on the Hill* arguably has many similar aspects to *Frankenstein*. This fact, unfortunately, has not been addressed by any studies, thus causing the researchers interested in discussing it.

Concerning the nature of the discussion, this research falls under the domain of literary influence study. Sinha (2021) elaborates that this study traces the influence that a writer has on other writers. This influence is examined through the idea, theme, technique, and many more. In this domain, one writer or work serves as the source, inspiration, or information for other work that comes after (Jost, 1974). Shelley's *Frankenstein* has introduced tropes of the creature and its creator that keep echoing to the recent works (Guston et al., 2017). Thus, by this account, the researchers believe that *Frankenstein* has provided sources for McMahon's *The Children on the Hill*.

METHOD

The method of this research is descriptive qualitative. It follows the framework of literary influence study. The data were taken from both novels, *Frankenstein* and *The Children on the Hill*, focusing on the narrative of Victor Frankenstein and Dr. Helen Hildreth, along with their creation. In analyzing the data, the researchers adopted the compare and contrast method to highlight the similarities and differences concerning the topic discussed.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

McMahon, in an interview with a librarian from West Valley Regional Branch Library, expressed her great admiration for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. She named *Frankenstein* the greatest monster story ever, and its author the first of the top five favorite or most influential authors for her writing career (Daryl, 2022). Shelley's *Frankenstein*, no doubt, becomes the biggest inspiration in writing *The Children on the Hill*. This section, then, identifies some parts of *Frankenstein* that are being inherited by *The Children on the Hill*. Among them are the creator's life, the reason for the creation, the process of the creation, and the tragic consequence of the creation.

In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Victor Frankenstein was the one who created the monster. He was described as someone who was deeply captivated by "natural philosophy" since his teenage years (Shelley, 2017, p. 20). He continued to study chemistry at Ingolstadt and was confident of his capability in "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter" (p. 34). Meanwhile, in *The Children on the Hill* (TCotH), Dr. Helen Hildreth, who conducted experiments on human life, has a scientific background similar to Victor's. In 1934, she was "the only female surgeon at the hospital—a groundbreaking role at the time (McMahon, 2021, p. 117) and became "a true pioneer in the field of psychiatry" by the late 1970s (p. 26).

Both Victor and Dr. Helen experienced great grief over the death of their family member. Victor lost her mother due to the scarlet fever she got from attending to Elizabeth, who was not

fully recovered from the same illness, “On the third day my mother sickened; her fever was very malignant, and the looks of her attendants prognosticated the worst event” (Shelley, 2017, p. 26). The mother’s death brought painful grief to a seventeen-year-old Victor, that he saw the death as “irreparable evil.” Dr. Helen, on the other hand, experienced tremendous grief for losing her stillborn twin girls and also her husband, who died six months later after worsened breathing and blood coughing, “[t]uberculosis was suspected, but the cause was mitral valve stenosis, a narrowing of the mitral valve to the heart, likely from scarlet fever when he was a boy (McMahon, 2021, p. 117).

Death, then, might become the unconscious trigger for Victor and Dr. Helen to conduct their experiments later and create “the monster.” Victor became “peculiarly attracted” to “the structure of human frame” and determined to examine the causes of life, “[a]fter days and nights of incredible labor and fatigue, [he]I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, [he] became [him]self capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter” (Shelley, 2017, p. 34). Dr. Helen, after the twins’ stillbirth and her husband’s death, “left surgery behind and began a residency in psychiatry” (McMahon, 2021, p. 118). She “was fascinated by the brain: not just the thoughts and emotions it engendered, but the actual physical gray matter” (p. 82). Dr. Helen’s expertise in both surgery and psychiatry made her believe in what she called “a holistic approach to psychiatry,” where brain and body were connected by traumas and memories (p. 83).

Victor’s discovery in “bestowing animation” led him to conduct a more complicated experience when he needed to employ his discovery to a frame of “fibres, muscles, and veins” (Shelley, 2017, p. 35). He “collected bones from charnel houses” and other materials from “dissecting room” and “slaughter-house” (p. 39). After almost a year, Victor finished reassembling a human frame, and he was ready to “infuse a spark of being” into the lifeless body. Not long past midnight, the “dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs” p. 41).

Meanwhile, Dr. Helen’s astonishment at the brain brought her to The Mayflower Project, which questioned the possibility of erasing human’s bad heredity “through an experimental regime of surgery, medications, and therapy” and turn them into “something greater” (McMahon, 2021, p. 177). When she realized that the failure of all the initial experiments was due to the old age of the patients, Dr. Helen started experimenting on a child, a girl of 8, who “was small for her age, quite pale, with filthy hands and face, tangled hair. But in her eyes, [she] saw something—a spark. A hint of intelligence; of promise” (p. 188). The child came from a highly dysfunctional family and was then referred to as Patient S. She was “wiped clean of memories, of any sense of ... her past self” through “a unique combination of medications, ECT, hypnosis, cold water therapy, and sensory deprivation.” After that, Patient S’ heart was made stopped by “either an electric shock or a high dose of seizure-inducing medication” and “must be started again ... either by electrical or manual means.” However, Dr. Helen’s preferred method was “open-chest cardiac massage,” in which she placed the heart horizontally on her flat and wide-open left palm and her right hand squeezed “at 100 beats per minute” on the “anterior surface of the organ.” She then put the heart back in Patient S’ chest after it began to beat on its own in Dr. Helen’s hand (p. 255-256).

Victor’s creation, unfortunately, did not meet his expectations. He had prepared the frame body with proportioned limbs, beautiful features, yellow skin, black lustrous hair, and pearly white teeth. However, what stood before him was a creature with watery eyes as dun as the sockets, a “shrivelled complexion, and straight black lips” (Shelley, 2017, p. 42). Victor was so horrified by the creature’s appearance that he immediately abandoned it and hid “in the

courtyard belonging to the house which [he] inhabited” (p. 43). Patient S, on the other hand, was reported to exceed all expectations (McMahon, 2021, p. 248). She was “progressing in a positive way” and “doing very well indeed” (p. 16). Dr. Helen recorded her patients’ progress in her off-limit notebook, and on one of the pages, she wrote about Patient S’ improvement.

Mayflower Project Notes:

Patient S continues to show tremendous progress. She seems to have no memory of anything that came before, or of her time in B West. She is learning new things every day and tests above level in all areas. I plan to continue medication regime and hypnosis. She is, by far, my greatest success. Perhaps, one day, I’ll be able to show her off to the world, to truly— (McMahon, 2021, p. 88).

The passage above recounts patient S’ treatment under Dr. Helen’s supervision. She had forgotten her origin and kept showing amazing progress.

Both Victor and Dr. Helen have played God in their experiments, and they have had to take the consequences for that. Victor’s creature, having experienced a harsh life from his creator’s abandonment and people’s rejection, became malicious and killed Victor’s dearest people. He strangled William, Victor’s youngest brother, to death, marking William as the first victim of the creature’s “sworn eternal revenge” for Victor (Shelley, 2017, p. 119). The creature then drowned Henry Clerval, Victor’s childhood friend (p. 143), to retaliate against Victor’s destroying the half-made female creature that the monster requested to create as his mate (p.140). As his last revenge, the creature killed Elizabeth, Victor’s newly-wed wife, on their wedding night (p.162), forcing Victor to vow that he will devote his life to the creature’s destruction (p.166). Patient S was also inclined to destruction when she knew her real identity was not Dr. Helen’s granddaughter but the doctor’s most successful experiment for the Mayflower Project. Patient S, who was named Violet, destroyed the secret laboratory where Dr. Helen conducted all the experiments with her patients. She was “full of hate and scorn and fury” (McMahon, 2021, p. 260). She choked Dr. Helen with the pillowcase and set the laboratory, as well as the whole building, on fire with Dr. Helen’s limp body in it (p. 265).

How McMahon executes the idea of humans playing God in *TCotH* undoubtedly is similar to Shelley. However, McMahon presented the idea in a more intensified and terrifying way. From the background of the monster’s creator, for example, Dr. Helen definitely had more experience than Victor. Although Victor and Dr. Helen were obsessed with similar fields of science, Victor to chemistry and Dr. Helen in surgery and psychiatry, Victor was just a university student when he conducted his experiment to create life. It is definitely different with Dr. Helen, who had already received her title and fame for her professional expertise when she finally succeeded in her project with Patient S. Another situation is when they both grieved over the death of the family. Victor indeed felt “the actual bitterness of grief” with his mother’s death, but Dr. Helen was more devastated when she had to lose her stillborn twins and her husband. The process of the creation also reflects McMahon’s intensified moment. Although both experiments were ethically questionable, Victor conducted his with the dead body while Dr. Helen performed it on her patients. It is terrifying to imagine Dr. Helen conducting all the procedures to the living human, let alone to the children. Finally, the ending in *TCotH* reveals the most terrifying surprise. It is quite surprising when Frankenstein ends with Victor’s monster jumping into the sea after his creator’s death. However, *TCotH* is more surprising when it does not end with Dr. Helen’s death and Patient S on the loose, but with the monster moving around to many places, abducting troubled teenage girls and creating them into new monsters, who willingly and proudly kill people who abused them.

CONCLUSION

Comparing Shelley's *Frankenstein* to McMahon's *The Children on the Hill* shows how much influence Shelley has on MacMahon in her latest work. Both works explore the theme of humans playing God, though *TCotH* echoes it in intensified and terrifying degrees. Victor and Dr. Helen are unconsciously driven by their grief over the death of their loved ones, making them desire to violate the natural order. However, *TCotH* offers a more chilling narrative through Dr. Helen's experimenting on the living subjects. Moreover, *TCotH* concludes differently from *Frankenstein* as it ends with the monster continuing the monstrous cycle, seizing the victims to make them other monsters. Through this, McMahon pays tribute to Shelley's classic while implying that a monster can be physically visible in its gruesome features. Nevertheless, it may also be hidden inside the personality and can turn nasty when being evoked.

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