

Henry Clerval Scolding Victor Frankenstein: An autoethnographic poem about graduate students and their daemons

Henry Clerval réprimande Victor Frankenstein : un poème autoethnographique sur les étudiants post-bac universitaire et leurs daemons

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Volume 55, numéro 3, automne 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083429ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083429ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

1916-0666 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Henze, A. (2020). Henry Clerval Scolding Victor Frankenstein: An autoethnographic poem about graduate students and their daemons. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 55(3), 685–692. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083429ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article explore les « daemons/démons » auxquels de nombreux étudiants universitaires sont confrontés en analysant de manière créative Frankenstein de Mary Shelley. À l'aide d'une méthode poétique appelée « erasure/effacement », l'auteur de cet article a sélectionné des descriptions fragmentées de Victor Frankenstein et les a cousues ensemble afin de créer un poème sur le besoin de prendre soin de soi dans le cadre universitaire. Le poème comprend une préface pour fournir un contexte théorique et de l'information de base sur Frankenstein.

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HENRY CLERVAL SCOLDING VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC POEM ABOUT GRADUATE STUDENTS AND THEIR DAEMONS

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the “daemons” that many university students face by investigating Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in a creative way. Using a poetic method called “erasure,” the author of this article cut fragmented descriptions of Victor Frankenstein and stitched them together to craft a poem about the need for self-care in the university setting. The poem includes a preface to provide some theoretical context and background information on *Frankenstein*.

HENRY CLERVAL RÉPRIMANDE VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN : UN POÈME
AUTOETHNOGRAPHIQUE SUR LES ÉTUDIANTS POST-BAC UNIVERSITAIRE ET LEURS
DAEMONS

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article explore les « daemons/démons » auxquels de nombreux étudiants universitaires sont confrontés en analysant de manière créative *Frankenstein* de Mary Shelley. À l’aide d’une méthode poétique appelée « erasure/effacement », l’auteur de cet article a sélectionné des descriptions fragmentées de Victor Frankenstein et les a cousues ensemble afin de créer un poème sur le besoin de prendre soin de soi dans le cadre universitaire. Le poème comprend une préface pour fournir un contexte théorique et de l’information de base sur *Frankenstein*.

I: A WORD OF FRIENDLY WARNING

The 1931 Universal film *Frankenstein* begins on an expository note with a “word of friendly warning.” Actor Edward Van Sloan steps from behind a curtain and, in an unconventional move, addresses the audience directly. He warns the audience they are about to see a portrayal of a scientist testing the will of God by bringing a dead body back to life. His speech concludes:

I think it may thrill you. It may shock you. It may even horrify you. So if any of you feel that you do not care to subject your nerves to such a strain, now is your chance to... Well, we’ve warned you. (1931)

The scene is a last-minute addition on the part of producers who feared church leaders and censors would find the content of the film objectionable. Though the scene was added, *Frankenstein* would become one of the most heavily censored films of the era, with dozens of iterations of the film existing as regional censors around the world cut bits and pieces (Skal, 1993). The addition of Van Sloan's address follows a prevailing trope in *Frankenstein* mythos: a move to disrupt the audience's experience and warn them they are headed someplace ghastly. In most versions of the story, friends and family stage varying interventions in the life of the young student Frankenstein, urging him to preserve his health and wellbeing over his pursuit of study. As a young researcher with bipolar disorder, feeling worn and ragged near the end of graduate school, it was hard not to see myself in Frankenstein. As more of my friends started to interrogate me about my own stress, sleep-health, and alcohol consumption, I realized that I should take the "friendly warnings" of my colleagues more seriously. Perhaps I could reflect on the lessons Frankenstein refused to learn.

As I have prepared this article for publication – an autoethnographic narrative written in verse – I wrestled with whether I should include an introduction that provides some theoretical context and necessary background information. However, a precedent exists for *Frankenstein*. James Whale's 1935 sequel, *Bride of Frankenstein*, includes an introductory scene, and several authors have included prefaces to the published versions of the novel, including Mary Shelley's husband Percy Shelley, her father William Godwin, and Mary Shelley herself.

A word of friendly warning: the primary content of this article is an autoethnographic poem (Prendergast, 2008) that I wrote during the 200th anniversary celebration of the publication of *Frankenstein* (Baumann, 2018). In contemporary mythos, Frankenstein is an accomplished degree-holding scientist who builds a creature in a large, pristine laboratory. In the original 1818 text, however, Frankenstein is an undergraduate student, who reanimates a dead body in his dormitory room. He is not the strikingly handsome Colin Clive or Peter Cushing, with a pressed dress shirt and loosened collar. He is described as haggard and falling apart, more like the face I saw in the mirror during the final weeks of my qualifying exams. That face startled me.

In Chapter 12 of *Frankenstein*, The Creature stares into a pool of water and realizes for the first time that he is wretched. That is an apt metaphor to consider when reading the poem in this article, which was created through a Creative Analytic Practice (Richardson, 1999) called "erasure." Stone (2017) explains: "Also known as blackout or redaction poetry, this is a type of poetry created from the substrate material of an existing text. Obscure many of the words, these poems command, and you will find the sentences that have been there all along" (p. 2). Mimicking The Creature's stare into the pool, I

attempted to look at myself by looking at Victor Frankenstein, using erasure of the 1818 text, to pluck out Mary Shelley's descriptions of the fledgling researcher. Frankenstein insistently ignores warnings from professors and peers about his self-destructive approach to study, and the fractured nature of the text signifies the increasing fractures in his mental health and relationships with others. Young (2008) reminds us that dissection and amalgamation are major motifs in *Frankenstein*. I use fragments of Mary Shelley's text and stitch them together to form a new narrative, which sheds some light on the metaphorical daemons that plague young academics in their quest for skill and mastery. By isolating and rearranging Mary Shelley's descriptions of Frankenstein's self-destructive behavior, my peers and I can reflect on our own unhealthy relationships with things like anxiety, sleep, depression, alcohol, and even suicidal ideation.

Frankenstein's lone friend Henry Clerval is a poet who consistently intervenes and urges Victor to stop isolating himself in his research process. I could hear the voice of my friends in Clerval who all intervened in various ways during my PhD. It seems fitting to author this poem in the voice of Henry Clerval. My friends intervened because they were scared for me, so in turn, I wrote a poem that scares me. Now, as I write this preface on Halloween week (2019), I share this fear with the greater research community. Perhaps this poem may also encourage you to stare into your own reflective pool. I think it may thrill you. It may shock you. It may even horrify you.

II. THE BODY

A Grad School Friend Chastises Me About Self Care, and Sounds like Henry Clerval Scolding Victor Frankenstein

Beloved Friend,

Seeing that sleep has fled your eyes,

I'll assume you've returned to old habits.

You fancy yourself a scientist, but I impress
you've only succeeded in discovering fatigue.¹

With how very ill you appear, it seems you've
employed every art to destroy yourself.²

While we may be unfashioned creatures,
our default need not be weak and faulty.³

You've absented yourself from all you love,
dear cousin, consumed in your sick room,⁴
burdening your brain with exploded systems
and useless names; the great ancient.
That sad trash as your father says.

You study structures of the human frame
yet you shun the face of man. Friend, you act
as if writing us back is the most abhorred task.⁵

With knowledge: you wish to overtake winds
and somehow unveil the very face of nature.
To a poet, these are the ravings of insanity.
You've become the author of unalterable evils.

I urge you, hear my deep and voiceless grief:
Banish dark passions. Quit this filthy process.
Say with lips livid with the hue of death you
refuse to walk through life a restless specter.

I've seen the way you stare into the silent lake,
eyeing the pool, an unexplored ocean of truth.
As if your existence is a blot upon the earth.⁶

I cannot support the horror of that countenance, Victor.
I will not be a hapless victim of your unhallowed arts.

The construction of our souls is not so strange.

No deranged mechanism is needed to spark being.

To restore life, you must hasten to seek out the sun.⁷

Behold its rise and recommence a new day, say

What it is to live, your body free of demons.

You need not feel the fangs of remorse,

fair student, or forcefully glut

your carriage with the maw of death.

Your Friend Until Death,

Henry Clerval

III. EPILOGUE: FOR THIS I HAD DEPRIVED MYSELF OF REST AND HEALTH

It was not my initial plan to provide an epilogue, because I hoped the Gothic images of my poem were haunting enough to stick with the reader. After receiving suggestions to conclude this article with a short reflection, I acquiesced, since a precedent for providing an epilogue also exists in *Frankenstein*. Director James Whale intended to end his film with Frankenstein and The Creature meeting a fiery death (Skal, 1993). However, the criticisms of censors compelled Universal executives to rethink the finale, and Whale was tasked with writing and filming a more palatable ending. In the scene, six maids carry a bottle of wine to Frankenstein's bed chamber and tell his father The Baron that a glass of wine may help his recovery. Through the doorway we see an uncredited actor dressed as a bedridden Colin Clive, suggesting to the viewer that Frankenstein survived the fury after all. As The Baron closes Frankenstein's door, he tells the maids his son "doesn't need" the wine for his wellbeing.

Since writing my poem, I have noticed that I take more rest days, and sometimes I even close the door when the chatter outside becomes too much. I am more mindful of when to slow my stride, and I get less frustrated at myself when I take breaks. When offered a glass of wine, sometimes I say that I don't need it. I try to talk more transparently about my daemons now, turning them into metaphorical monsters in my stories. Recovery is a slow process, but lately, the silent lake by my school doesn't seem as scary.

NOTES

1. A study in the United Arab Emirates found that 67% percent of university students “suffer from sleep disturbances and poor sleep quality” (Afandi et al., 2013), which correlates with numbers found in studies conducted in the United States and Taiwan. There are over 30 references to sleep in *Frankenstein*, and Victor speaks of experiencing insomnia, chronic fatigue, and dream anxiety disorder. One of the most notable passages of the book reads: “Sleep fled from my eyes; I wandered like an evil spirit (Shelley, 1818, p. 75).” I sometimes joke with my friends that I can sleep when I am dead.

2. Research in Iran, the UK, and the United States shows that university students have a high prevalence of substance abuse (Jalilian, 2015), with “tension” cited as a common reason for students to use drugs and alcohol. In *Frankenstein*, Victor takes an opiate called laudanum to help him stave off paranoia enough to sleep. Victor rationalizes his increased dosage, arguing that “it was by means of this drug only that I was enabled to gain the rest necessary for the preservation of life (Shelley, 1818, p. 164).” I tell my friends the same about my own ways of self-medicating: each dosage is just a “small quantity” to help kickstart my sleep.

3. Studies in the United States and Korea show a correlation between depression, anxiety, and the decision for students to “self-isolate” (Chow et al., 2017). These studies suggest that as digital culture becomes more prevalent in university settings, student mental health challenges will continue to grow on campuses and necessitate the need to hire staff with understandings of the shifting digital landscape. Technology becomes an excuse for Victor to isolate himself in *Frankenstein*, and he argues why he must keep his experiments secret because he “will not lead you on, unguarded and ardent as I then was, to your destruction and infallible misery (Shelley, 1818, p. 40).” I tell my friends I'm limiting my screen time, and that I'm not spending as much time on social media as it seems.

4. A study in the United States shows that college students with chronic illnesses show a higher prevalence of “depressive and anxious symptomology,” (Mullins et al., 2017) suggesting that a student's physical illness may be a significant predictor of symptoms of mental illness. In *Frankenstein*, Victor's experiences of grief gravely impact his body, resulting in symptoms described as fainting, chronic fatigue, comatose sleep, hysteria, and convulsions. One recollection reads, “I lay for two months on the point of death; my ravings, as I afterwards heard, were frightful (Shelley, 1818, p. 158).” I try to convince my friends that the reason I drink daily is to numb the aches enough to keep going.

5. Research shows that international students face an increased risk of isolation (Wu et al., 2015). A Swiss scientist, Victor himself is an international student in *Frankenstein*, studying at a Bavarian university called Ingolstadt. He describes the journey there as “long and fatiguing,” and finds himself at odds with the values of many of his professors. I take the opportunity to use statistics to dismiss the concerns of my friends, saying that I have local supports that some international students don't have in our department.

6. Research shows that suicide is the second leading cause of death for college students in the United States, and studies suggest that experiences of suicidal ideation are disproportionately higher for students who are racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities (Shadick et al., 2015). Victor contemplates suicide by drowning in *Frankenstein*, saying he hopes “the waters might close over me

and my calamities forever (Shelley, 1818, p. 76)." Sometimes I joke with friends that if I kill myself, I won't have to finish my dissertation.

7. A study of 98 campuses in the United States found that many university Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) are failing to keep up with a troubling spike in demand for mental healthcare, with some schools listing wait times of two-to-three weeks (Thielking, 2017). A related survey found that large campuses in the United States host an average of one licensed mental health provider per 3,500 students. Though Frankenstein has been used as a cautionary tale for 200 years, most schools still lack adequate support to meet the needs of students fleeing their daemons. For years I used facts about systems as excuses to not get help for my own issues, but the interventions of my friends eventually disrupted this pattern. Finally, I heeded the friendly warnings: I promised to reconfigure my relationships with sleep and drinking, and I made an appointment with CAP services at my university.

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