

Mar 1st, 8:55 AM

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Salter, Connor, "Frankenstein and Weston, Ransom and Van Helsing: Common Characters in the Works of Terence Fisher and C.S. Lewis" (2019). *Making Literature Conference*. 1.
<https://pillars.taylor.edu/makingliterature/2019conference/ce3/1>

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“Frankenstein and Weston, Ransom and Van Helsing: Common Characters in the Works of
Terence Fisher and C.S. Lewis”

By G. Connor Salter

Few people would think to connection between author C.S. Lewis and filmmaker Terence Fisher. Although both men lived in the United Kingdom during the same period and belonged to the Church of England, their respective works seem miles apart. Lewis wrote lay theology and fiction, most notably the fantasy series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Fisher directed horror films, including the classic films *The Curse of Frankenstein* and *Dracula* (released in the United States as *The Horror of Dracula*). And yet, Paul Leggett claims in his book *Terence Fisher: Horror, Myth and Religion* that Fisher’s horror films have much in common with Lewis’ fiction. He notes Christian themes and symbolism in Fisher’s films that, according to him, make Fisher “a kindred spirit” with C.S. Lewis and other members of the Inklings (Leggett 11). Scholars may find this comparison hard to believe. After all, Lewis’ fiction usually had plots involving characters directly seeing God or something divine face to face. Fisher’s films seem to exist on the opposite end of the spectrum, since most of their plots involve coming face to face with supernatural evil. This would suggest if anything there are more connections between Fisher’s films and the works of Lewis’ friend Charles Williams, author of supernatural thrillers such as *War in Heaven* and *Descent into Hell*.

However, Fisher famously maintained his films were not horror films but rather dark fairy tales. In a 1975 interview for *Cinefantastique*, Fisher commented “Period vampire stories - even Frankenstein – are fairy tales. It is fantasy – grim fantasy, and grim fairy tale. That is a pun. But it's a good pun, because Grimm wasn't a gentle storyteller, was he?” (Ringel 22). Some scholars and reviewers agree with this statement, including *Telegraph* contributor Anne Billson

who described his films and others produced by the company Hammer Studio as "fairy-tales in the gruesome tradition of Grimm" (1). This assumption makes it simple to connect Fisher's work with the fairy tale tradition that Lewis and other members of the Inklings contributed to. One of the more famous Inklings, J.R.R. Tolkien, explicitly connected the Grimm Brothers' stories to the larger field of "fairy stories" in his famous essay on the subject (48). In that same essay Tolkien criticized scholars for telling "mollified versions of Grimm" (48) and argued "[children] should not be spared it – unless they are spared the whole story until their digestions are stronger" (48). In this context then, Fisher's films may be darker than Lewis and Tolkien's stories, but each of their works were all about exploring "Faërie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being" (Tolkien 32).

A comparison of Fisher and Lewis' stories shows that in fact they often explored the same themes and ideas. They particularly both wrote stories featuring men who were either fighting unusual evil on God's behalf or trying to blaspheme God by seeking forbidden knowledge. These two figures may be described as "the wise man" and "the blasphemer."

The wise man is a figure who combines religious belief with realism and uses this combination to battle supernatural evil. Legget calls this figure "The man of wisdom" (60) and notes he appears in many of Fisher's film, most notably as Van Helsing in two of Fisher's Dracula films. Lewis' fiction includes a similar character in the form of Professor Kirke in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* and Dr. Elwin Ransom in the Space Trilogy.

The wise man not only fights supernatural forces, he develops a working and even expert knowledge of how to face them, showing no shock about the battles he must take part in. In *Dracula* and *Brides of Dracula*, Van Helsing carries crucifixes, stakes and hammers with a practiced air like a carpenter handling his hammer and chisel. While supporting characters are

shocked at the existence of vampires and the procedures needed to kill them, Van Helsing calmly handles the situations like a doctor going into surgery.

Ransom reaches a similar perspective over the first two books in Lewis' Space Trilogy, *Out of the Silent Planet* and *Perelandra*. When he travels to the planet Malacandra (or Mars) in *Out of the Silent Planet*, he initially experiences shock and fear but by he eventually becomes comfortable with the planet and knows it better than Weston, the man who brought him to Malacandra and has visited it multiple times. Ransom comes to understand the planet's primary language better than Weston (*Out of the Silent Planet* 126-129, 133-140) and can see divine beings called *eldila*, which Weston dismisses as a conjuring trick (*Out of the Silent Planet* 125). In *Perelandra*, Ransom comfortably interacts with an *eldila* who enters his home and accepts a mission the *eldila* gives him to visit the planet Venus (or *Perelandra*). When speaking with *Perelandra's* narrator, he describes the odd way he will travel (naked in a coffin-like vessel powered by an *eldila* [20, 24]) without any apparent qualms. He admits he understands "the absurdity of it" (*Perelandra* 21), but his attitudes shows he is not shocked by the apparent absurdity. Like Van Helsing, he has learned to accept strange and unusual events and become a willing champion for goodness.

Although the wise man calmly accepts the supernatural, he shows caution about how much of it he explains to other people. Rather than immediately telling people when he detects a supernatural cause behind strange events, he frequently makes inferences and prods people to discovering the truth for themselves. In *Dracula*, Van Helsing tries to locate his missing friend, fellow vampire hunter Jonathon Harker, only to discover Harker was made into a vampire by Count Dracula. After staking Harker's heart, Van Helsing visits the family of Harker's fiancée, explaining Harker has died but avoids telling them the cause of death. Days later, after Harker's

fiancée Mina has died from vampire bites, her brother Arthur Holmwood blames Van Helsing for her death. Van Helsing knows the true cause, but also that Holmwood won't believe him if he says vampires caused Mina's death. Instead, Van Helsing gives him Harker's diary, explaining it details how he died. By reading the diary's entry where Harker being bitten a vampire and then investigating claims that Mina is still alive after being buried, Arthur discovers vampires do in fact exist. He then joins forces with Van Helsing, who finally reveals everything to him as they hunt down Dracula.

Professor Kirke takes a similar tactic when Peter and Susan seek his advice in *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Peter and Susan think their sister Lucy is either lying or losing her mind since she insists she has visited a magical world. Kirke, who has visited magical worlds himself, listen to their concerns and then he asks them a question: "How do you know... that your sister's story is not true?" (Lewis 47). Susan and Peter are shocked at this, but Kirke insists on applying logic to their problem. After discussing the various logical possibilities, he brings them to consider the possibility other worlds exist and Lucy may have entered one (Lewis 47-51). He knows telling Peter and Susan about his own experience will do no good unless they already believe in such things. So, he makes Peter and Susan think about the problem, giving them the impetus to reach the truth on their own.

Lewis and Fisher also both seem to use the wise man as a critique of priests. As Leggett notes, Fisher's films often contrasts the wise man against materialists who don't believe in the supernatural and priests who may know the supernatural exists but don't have the experience to recognize or fight supernatural forces (Leggett 60-62). In *Brides of Dracula*, Van Helsing visits a village because a priest contacts him for helping fighting a vampire outbreak, the priest tries to

help Van Helsing but knows nothing about fighting vampires. His only helpful action is giving Van Helsing information and supplying a flask of holy water which Van Helsing uses later.

Lewis rarely includes clergymen or priests in his fiction except in *That Hideous Strength*, and but there he contrasts them sharply with the characters serving holy purposes. The novel features two clergymen, the Bracton College Bursar who left the priesthood (Lewis 35) and Reverend Straik, also known as "the Mad Parson" (Lewis 76). Both men are clearly described as having lost their sense of morality. Meanwhile, the characters who fight against evil forces are headed by Ransom, a former philology teacher from Cambridge, and as he puts it his fellow fighters consist of "Four men, some woman, and a bear" (Lewis 289). None of these persons have any formal theology training. One of these four men, Macphee, doesn't even believe in the eldila who are guiding Ransom; he just recognizes evil enough to fight it. So, Lewis reaches the same conclusion in *That Hideous Strength* that Fisher reaches in his films: the person who can truly stand against evil is one who may not wear the cloth but has taken God's truth to heart.

On the opposite extreme from the wise man stands the relentless blasphemer, a man who tries to find forbidden knowledge for his own profit or for philosophical reasons that ultimately defame God. For Fisher, this character is Baron Victor Frankenstein, who appears in five of his films. For Lewis, this character is Weston in the Space Trilogy and Uncle Andrew in *The Magician's Nephew*.

As the relentless blasphemer pursues his quest for knowledge, he thinks nothing of exploiting or misusing animals and people. Winston Wheeler Dixon notes that in Fisher's first Frankenstein film, Baron Frankenstein "has no compunction about misrepresenting himself, using bribery, engaging in a grave robbing, even putting his fiancée at risk if it will further his experimental research" (240-241). This behavior continues throughout the other Frankenstein

films. In the second film, *Revenge of Frankenstein*, the Baron works at a beggar's hospital specifically so he can amputate patients' limbs to make a new creature. In the third film, *Frankenstein Created Woman*, he shows no remorse when one of his employees gets falsely executed for murder, then quickly uses the employee's body for an experiment. In the fourth film (aptly titled *Frankenstein Must be Destroyed*), Frankenstein blackmails a young couple into committing burglary and murder so he can build a new lab and continue his research. The last film, *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell*, shows the Baron at his most manipulative: he works in an insane asylum, harvesting inmates' limbs to build a new creature, and even drives one inmate to suicide so he can harvest the man's brain. When the experiment creates a creature who can't fully function, Frankenstein plans to cut his losses by mating it with a female inmate so he can continue his research on the resulting child.

Lewis gives Weston a similar attitude. When readers first meet Weston in *Out of the Silent Planet*, he and his colleague Devine are trying to force a handicapped boy into a spaceship (Lewis 13-16) so they can take him to Mars for what Weston imagines to be a sacrificial rite (36). When Ransom intervenes, Weston angrily tells Devine, "We ought to have a dog in this place," to which Devine replies "You mean we should have a dog if you hadn't insisted on using Tartar for an experiment" (Lewis 14). A few pages later, Weston reluctantly substitutes Ransom for the handicapped boy, which takes some persuading, but only because he saw the boy as subhuman (Lewis 21). In the end Weston sees everything and anything as tools for his explorations.

In *The Magician's Nephew*, Uncle Andrew shows a similar attitude to the animals and even to small children. He explains to his nephew Diggory how he bought guinea pigs to experiment with some magic dust he'd found, and without any remorse mentions some of the

guinea pigs died naturally and others exploded (Lewis 24). When Diggory notes the cruelty, Uncle Andrew responds, "how you do keep getting off the point!... That's what the creatures were for" (Lewis 24). This is precisely the kind of thing Frankenstein says throughout Fisher's films. Uncle Andrew's most callous and manipulative actions come however, after he makes the magic dust into several rings and discovers the rings can transport objects into other worlds. In order to learn where the objects go to and whether they could be return to their original location, Andrew manipulates Diggory's friend Polly, a very young girl, into accepting one of the rings (Lewis 16-17). When Diggory asks him why he didn't simply use a ring himself, Andrew reacts as if that's a ridiculous suggestion (Lewis 25). Instead, Andrew manipulates Polly into making the journey, and then convinces Diggory (an equally young child) to use another ring to try and bring Polly back (Lewis 26-27). Andrew clearly believes he's following a noble quest to get his information, and anyone and everyone else can be used as experimental fodder. As Stephen Fitzpatrick puts it, Uncle Andrew believes "knowledge is something to be used, rather than something gained for its own sake. This is a fundamentally violent approach. If people or animals must suffer in order for him to make his gains, then so be it. The ends justify the means" (1).

Not only will the relentless blasphemer use anything to reach his goal, he usually will keep going and trying to usurp the natural order no matter what happens. By the end of Fisher's last Frankenstein film, *Frankenstein and the Monster from Hell*, the Baron has made six creatures. Five of these creatures murder people; the creature in the third film, *Frankenstein Created Woman*, even becomes a serial killer. The primary of two creatures in the second film, *Revenge of Frankenstein*, apparently develops cannibal tendencies (Leggett 19). Only one creature successfully survives more than one film: the second one which Frankenstein builds in

Revenge to have his own brain transferred into so he can fake his death. However, this does not fully prove he has defeated death; he needs to use a deceased brain to prove he can fully create life from nothing. In addition, his megalomaniac behavior increases with each film; he becomes a functioning but not healthy or rational being after his transformation. Despite all these failures, the last film ends with Frankenstein sitting in his trashed laboratory, mending his wounds and plotting to start again; "I've been thinking about what went wrong," he informs his two employees, "too much reliance on surgery, too little on bio-chemistry".

While Uncle Andrew doesn't show this kind of obsession, Weston certainly does. Despite being humiliating in *Out of the Silent Planet* and nearly dying on a forced return journey to Earth, Weston returns to space travel in *Perelandra*, every bit as arrogant and convinced he can master environments and conquer worlds. In an interesting coincidence, Frankenstein and Weston both end up having to sever their minds from their bodies in their quests for blasphemous knowledge. As previously noted, *The Revenge of Frankenstein* ends with Frankenstein having his brain switched to a bodies he's built, becoming his own creation. In *Perelandra*, Weston says he's come to the planet with help from the "Life-Force" a cosmic energy he believes God and Satan are both derived from (Lewis 80). When Ransom resists this idea, Weston angrily responds he is one with this spiritual force and declares "I, Weston, am your God and your Devil. I call that Force into me completely..." (Lewis 82). At that moment a demonic force enters Weston and takes over his mind (Lewis 82-83). He becomes what Ransom calls "the Un-man" (Lewis 105), something less than human. He has the same body, but his mind gets taken over by the dark forces he invoked. Frankenstein becomes his own inferior creation, Weston becomes the ultimate being that defies God (an embodiment of demons).

Plot and stylistic differences aside, it is clear Terence Fisher and C.S. Lewis explored similar ideas in their respective works. As Christians, their works were often both preoccupied with the problem of humans trying to learn knowledge that only God should have or humans serving God by combating supernatural evil. As such, their works both showed a strong understanding that there are supernatural forces beyond this world and the power of fairy tales (dark or light-hearted ones) to examine this truth.

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