

“half-and-half child”:
Colonization, Tradition, and Identity in Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl*

Helen Oyeyemi’s 2004 novel, *The Icarus Girl*, is a postcolonial adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Though not marketed as a Young Adult novel, *The Icarus Girl* is nonetheless identified as such in reviews from *Booklist* and *School Library Journal*, and it emphasizes the child protagonist’s search for self and identity (a crucial element of YA fiction, as defined by YALSA).

While Mary Shelley explores early nineteenth-century fears of scientific discovery and the place of a woman writer within a male literary tradition, Oyeyemi, a Nigerian-born British writer, combines Gothic conventions, British literary history, and Nigerian history and traditions to confront twenty-first-century anxieties about race, place, and the inextricable link between past and present. Eight-year-old Jessamy Harrison lives in London with her Nigerian mother and English father, and she suffers from severe anxiety and unpredictable screaming fits, though no one knows why. During her family’s first visit to Nigeria, Jessamy befriends a girl named Tilly Tilly, whose strangeness soon becomes threatening. Like Victor Frankenstein, Jessamy is haunted by a creature who desires to take her life; however, Victor deliberately creates his monster, and Tilly Tilly simply appears—a supernatural manifestation of personal and social history in the form of a monstrous little girl. Through her mental and physical battles, Jessamy comes to embody the trauma of colonization, and she must reconnect with her ancestors’ traditions to heal. This essay will explore the ways in which *The Icarus Girl* gives voice to a multiply-marginalized child to engage contemporary political and social struggles.