

# Matt's Initiation in a Dystopian World: Nancy Farmer's *The House of the Scorpion*\*

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*The House of the Scorpion* (2002) is a National Book Award winner by American YA (young adult) novelist Nancy Farmer. It is a coming-of-age story about Matt, a young clone struggling for acceptance and survival in a dystopian world. Under the veil of science fiction, *The House of the Scorpion* not only allegorically exposes the evil of dehumanization, totalitarianism, and the abuse of technology, but also successfully builds up the brave image of Matt. Through depicting protagonist Matt's initiation journey in a dystopian world, Nancy Farmer expresses her belief that goodness triumphs and hope is indestructible.

*Keywords:* *The House of Scorpion*, Nancy Farmer, dystopian, initiation, hope

## Introduction

*The House of the Scorpion* (2002) is a winner of the National Book Award by American YA novelist Nancy Farmer. It is a coming-of-age story about a young clone struggling for acceptance and survival in a dystopian world. The protagonist of the novel is a young clone named Matt, who is the clone of El Patrón, the cruel 142-year-old ruler of Opium, a drug kingdom between Aztlán (now called Mexico) and the United States. As the clone of El Patrón, Matt's fate is destined to be tragic. When the time comes, he will be harvested as an organ transplant for El Patrón to prolong his life span. But with the help of friends around him, Matt finally learns to value himself, ignoring the contempt of others, and comes to understand that he has the power to make change for good and control his own fate.

Since its publication in 2002, this inspiring tale of friendship, survival, hope, and love has received much praise from both critics and readers. The New York Times Book Review hailed it as "A big, ambitious tale...with more than a whiff of the old fashioned adventure tale" (p. 6). The Barnes and Noble Review once commented that:

With all the makings of a modern classic, *The House of the Scorpion* is both shocking and intense, particularly because it looks toward an all-too-possible future. Matt is a courageous, sympathetic character, but his strong-willed fits of anger, which mirror El Patrón's, leave a bittersweet taste amid his good intentions. Another impressive book from Farmer, this novel is true science fiction genius. (p. 9)

Starred Review Booklist also claimed that

This is a powerful, ultimately hopeful story that builds on today's sociopolitical, ethical, and scientific issues and prognosticates a compelling picture of what the future could bring. All of these serious issues are held together by a

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remarkable coming-of-age story. (p. 5)

“Farmer’s novel may be futuristic, but it hits close to home, raising questions of what it means to be human, what is the value of life, and what are the responsibilities of a society” (Brown, 2002, p. 154). Under the veil of science fiction, *The House of the Scorpion* allegorically exposes the evil of dehumanization, totalitarianism, and the abuse of technology. Through depicting protagonist Matt’s initiation in a dystopian world, Nancy Farmer expresses her belief that goodness triumphs and hope is indestructible.

### **A Dystopian World**

According to Wikipedia (2015), the free encyclopedia, a dystopia is an imaginary community or society that is undesirable or frightening. It is literally translated as “not-good place”, an antonym of utopia. Such societies appear in many artistic works, particularly in stories set in the future. Dystopias are often characterized by dehumanization, totalitarian governments, environmental disaster, or other characteristics associated with a cataclysmic decline in society. When *The House of the Scorpion* came out in 2002, many considered it as “one of the best dystopian novels for teen readers” (Levy, 2013, p. 19). Wandering in Nancy Farmer elaborately imagined dystopian world, readers can strongly sense the oppression, inhumanity, and injustice brought by totalitarianism and the abuse of technology.

There are two parts in *The House of the Scorpion*. The first part is from Chapter 1 to Chapter 25; mainly about Matt’s life in Opium from birth to age 14. The second part is from Chapter 26 to Chapter 38 focusing on Matt’s life in an orphanage. In the first part, a dystopian world is manifested by the inhuman treatment towards clones as well the eejits.

In the Opium, the drug kingdom, clones are injected at birth to stunt their brains and are treated as animals, not pets to be loved but terrifying beasts. The detailed description of the clone of Mr. MacGregor, a drug lord, clearly shows the inhuman condition of the clones:

“It’s a boy”, whispered Maria.

It was. Only at first Matt thought it was some kind of beast, so alien and terrible was its face. It had doughy, unhealthy skin and red hair that stuck up in bristles. It seemed never to have been in the sun, and its hands were twisted like claws above the straps that held it down. It was dressed in green hospital pajamas, but these had been befouled by its terror. Worst of all was the terrible energy that rolled through the trapped body. The creature never stopped moving. It was as though invisible snakes were rippling beneath the skin and forcing its arms and legs to move in a ceaseless bid for freedom. (Farmer, 2002, p. 120)

Matt escapes the fate of brain damage only because he is the clone of El Patrón, the ruler of Opium. Even though he can read and write, climb hills, play music, and do anything a real human might do, he is still regarded as a subhuman, nothing more than a beast and a repository of spare parts. This ideology is deeply rooted in the El Patrón’s family that even children are poisoned by this inhuman idea, just as Maria, the younger daughter of Senator Mendoza, says to Matt when she first realizes that Matt is a clone “Well, you never know. Emilia says clones are as vicious as werewolves. Did you see the story on TV about the boy who got hair all over him when the moon was full?” (Farmer, 2002, p. 30).

Besides clones, eejits are another exploited class in the Opium. They are persons with implants in their heads who are passive slaves of the opium empire. Some eejits are illegal immigrants and some are victims who have offended El Patrón’s authority. Eejits can do only simple things. They pick fruit, sweep floors, or harvest opium. “The eejits felt neither cold nor heat nor thirst nor loneliness. A computer chip in their brains

removed those sensations” (Farmer, 2002, p. 197). They work without resting until the foreman orders them to stop and do not drink water unless someone tells them to. Their working and condition are terrible; their lives are trivial and they are just tools of making money in the opium empire:

The fields shimmered with heat, and a sweet odor with something rotten at its core filled the air. The workers bent and slashed, bent and slashed in a hypnotic rhythm. They didn't speak. They didn't even wipe the sweat off their faces. (Farmer, 2002, p. 77)

Besides, the detailed description of the eejit pens reinforces the inhuman living condition of the eejits:

They were buildings. They stretched in long rows with doors and dark little windows every so often. The roofs were so low, Matt wondered whether a person could stand up inside. The windows were covered with iron bars. Could this be where the eejits live? This idea was appalling. The closer Matt got, the stronger the stench became. It was a compound of rotten fish, excrement, and vomit, with a sweet chemical odor that was worse than the other smells put together. (Farmer, 2002, pp. 171-172)

In *Opium*, El Patrón's family and their associates are the ruling class who hold total authority over the clones and eejits. Utilizing advanced biotechnology, people from the ruling class can maintain their bodies far beyond their natural life span by the use of organs harvested from young adult clones, while when eejits die, their bodies are “plow[ed] into the dirt for fertilizer” (Farmer, 2002, p. 197). By making a sharp contrast between the protected bodies of ruling class and the exploited bodies of the ruled, Nancy Farmer allegorically exposes the evil of totalitarianism and the abuse of technology.

In the second part of the novel, with the help of Tam Lin, a bodyguard of El Patrón, Matt successfully escapes into Aztlán, where he comes across border guards, who send him to an orphanage and he lives with a group of orphans. These orphans are called the “Lost Boys”, and are guarded by “Keepers” who operate plankton farms and force the orphans to do manual labor and subsist on plankton. “Keepers” are both hypocritical and brutal. They use “the Five Principles of Good Citizenship and the Four Attitudes Leading to Right-Mindfulness” (Farmer, 2002, p. 282) to control the boys' minds. In their propaganda, “[I]n the new Aztlán everything is shared equally” (Farmer, p. 283), but the truth is just the opposite. The orphanage in the novel reminds readers of Nazis' concentration camp with its guard fence, blinding spotlight, and the harsh penalty towards the “Lost Boys”:

Jorge paced back and forth. He seemed to be deciding what part of Ton-Ton to hit. The boy's arms and legs were trembling so hard, it seemed likely he'd fall over before Jorge laid a hand on him. Matt could hardly believe what was happening. It was so cruel, so pointless. Ton-Ton had shown himself eager to obey. He humbled himself whenever the Keepers asked. (Farmer, 2002, p. 301)

Permeated with the odor of evil, terror, and death, the world created by Nancy Farmer in *The House of the Scorpion* is a dystopian world where Matt's initiation journey is bound to be fraught with hardship and difficulties.

### **Matt's Initiation Journey**

Dean Schneider once says in “A Clone Becomes a Man” that

*The House of the Scorpion* is a many-layered and complicated novel about a clone becoming a man. Despite the science fiction aura of the tale, it is a coming-of-age story about a boy striving to found out who he is. (Schneider, 2005, p. 23)

As a coming-of-age story, Matt's identity cognition becomes the narrative impetus that pushes forward the development of the plot. Cognitive development is an important part of Matt's growth. In *The House of the Scorpion*, Nancy Farmer demonstrates his initiation journey in dramatic events that interweave his identity cognition which undergoes three stages namely the stage of self-losing, stage of self-seeking, and the stage of self-salvation.

Before Maria comes by one day, Matt is kept secretly in a hut with Celia, the chief cook for El Patrón's family. During these six years, Matt knows nothing about his identify, who he is, who his parents are, or what his future holds. After he smashes the window and severely injures himself, he is plunged into a harsh world where his identity as a clone is discovered and is abused by people around him. Realizing that the fate of a clone is destined to be harvested as an organ donor and then discarded as a useless "thing", Matt is overwhelmed by fear and grief:

On the surface Matt's life settles into a pleasure rhythm. He studies via distance learning over TV; Tam Lin sends off the homework; it comes back with excellent grades; and Celia praises Matt lavishly... But underneath Matt feels hollow. He understands he is only a photograph of a human, and that means he is not really important. Photographs could lie forgotten in drawers for years. They can be thrown away (Farmer, 2002, p. 84).

In *A Study of American Initiation Stories*, professor RUI Yu-ping has suggested that almost all protagonists in initiation stories encounter their "mentor" on their way of seeking who exerts either positive or negative influence on the development of the protagonist. The positive "mentor" usually contains the following features:

- (1) They treat the adolescent character equally;
- (2) They are willing to help others or full of compassion;
- (3) They have unusual social status or personalities, which results in their detachment to the mainstream of society and hopes to make friends with the young people;
- (4) Similar to those young people they instruct, they are also marginalized people in the society who are not been assimilated by the mainstream (RUI, 2004, p. 126).

Tam Lin, the bodyguard of El Patrón's is such a positive "mentor" to Matt. As a former terrorist from Scotland, Tam Lin belongs to the marginalized people in the society. He feels guilty of mistakenly killed several children on his mission in Scotland. Although with "dangerous looking" (Farmer, 2002, p. 67), Tam Lin is a man of compassion and is willing to help other. He treats Matt equally. He protects Matt and helps Matt to understand the evil of drug industry as well as the value of life. Tam Lin informs Matt that "No one can tell the difference between a clone and a human. That is because there is not any difference. The idea of clones being inferior is a filthy lie (Farmer, 2002, p. 294). Tam Lin even calls Matt a human and expects much more from him. He also talks about courage and loyalty to Matt. He lets Matt do dangerous things on their expeditions and go off by himself to explore the nature.

With the help of Tam Lin, Matt successfully escapes Opium and steps on the way of self-salvation. He rebels against the "Keepers" in an orphanage and tries his best to escape the evil clutches of the "Keepers". Having escapes Opium, Matt travels through Aztlán when El Patrón dies and Matt returns to take over the running Opium. Matt's return has great significance since his return means a lot:

[N]ot only does Matt gains ownership of property and thus domination over the natural environment but he also gains

ownership of Opium's slaves. This property ownership, not just of the self but of others, guarantees Matt's freedom in terms of self-sovereignty, a conclusion which the implied reader has been positioned throughout to hope for, but it also entails denying others self-ownership. (Naarah, 2009, p. 174)

Matt's freedom and triumph are the result of his self-salvation. Matt's journey from self-losing, self-seeking, and self-salvation witnesses his growth and maturity.

At the end of the novel, when Maria's mother, Esperanza asks Matt to promise her that once he is in control of the Opium, he will destroy the opium empire and tear down the barrier that keeps Aztlán and the United States apart for so long, Matt accepts. Even though, as a clone of El Patrón, Matt has some emotional attachment to the drug lord; he still determines to destroy the Opium since at that moment he reaches his epiphany after experiencing so many ups and downs:

But how could he refuse after the terrible sufferings El Patrón had caused? He understood the full extent of it now. It wasn't only the drug addicts throughout the world or the Illegals doomed to slavery. It was their orphaned children as well. (Farmer, 2002, p. 368)

### Conclusion

When asked what she would like readers to take away from her books, Farmer once replied: "My first aim is to entertain, to keep them riveted. Secondly, I want them to come away with the feeling that they can be strong, that they can do things—and that they must not give in" (Brown, 2002, p. 155). Through depicting Matt's initiation journey in a dystopian world, under the veil of science fiction, Nancy Farmer not only allegorically exposes the evil of dehumanization, totalitarianism, and the abuse of technology, but also successfully builds up the brave image of Matt. Matt's final return and freedom symbolize hope. "Tomorrow he would begin the task of breaking down the empire of Opium. It was a huge and terrifying job, but he wasn't alone" (Farmer, 2002, p. 380). This optimistic ending of the novel expresses Nancy Farmer's belief that goodness triumphs and hope is indestructible.

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