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# FORUM

## A Monstrous Pedagogy

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While having students in the freshman composition classroom write essays concerning vampires, zombies, mummies, and werewolves may seem like an exercise purely in the fantastical or the trivial, unpacking such cultural phenomena provides them with a veritable cornucopia of critical thinking opportunities. Furthermore, students get the chance to contribute ideas to a relatively untapped area of academic inquiry, challenging them to extend key intellectual faculties possessed by experienced writers: rhetorical awareness, research acumen, sensitivity to multiple perspectives, and investment into a series of ideas in a body of work over the course of a semester and beyond. Better yet, you won't be reading arguments about gun control or abortion, at least not framed in the usual manner. Students will have to look into and beyond the familiar—both with regards to monstrous manifestations and themselves—as this approach insists significant cognizance of their cultural surroundings.

I can generally orient my writing sequence in terms of popular culture studies, though anthropology, history, and psychology are equally important considerations. In all likelihood, every society expresses latent anxiety through cultural forms, and individuals exhibit varying degrees of fear or uneasiness regarding these socially constructed phenomena: monsters are manifested representations of these anxieties. Anthropologist Mary Douglas has written about cross-cultural taboos on pollution, how these beliefs not only reinforce social pressures but also show how social order is maintained “by dangers which threaten transgressors” (3). Douglas' use of the term “pollution” is not literal: it concerns the cultural norms on “purity,” in either a physical or spiritual sense. Monsters are an example of the “dangers” that she is referring to and often serve to function as deterrents to bad behavior. “Slashers” such as *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween*, for example, feature characters known for killing misbehaving teens. Vampires and zombies in Western culture are directly representative of the pollution Douglas refers to: both creatures infect their victims, turning them into walking corpses, operating on the

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uncomfortable border between life and death. Cultural assumptions concerning epidemiology aside, this fluid exchange is quasi-sexual, especially in the case with vampires, who sap the vitality from their victims.

In exposing cross-cultural similarities concerning taboo, Douglas assists in establishing a broader theoretical lens through which all cultures are equally, and somewhat objectively, regarded. In this way, monsters are tools used to analyze a given society. Douglas argues that “defilement is never an isolated event” and that “it cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas” (51). Essentially, this means that defilement is culturally constructed, as are all hierarchical orderings, whether they concern class, ethnicity, social position, or any other human means of classification.

Most monsters have deep roots in folklore. Vampires, werewolves, and ghosts, among many others, manifest in a variety of ways in popular mythologies throughout the span of written and oral tradition. Monsters exhibit various levels of cultural sophistication and complexity. The Frankenstein Monster, for example, has undergone numerous cultural transformations throughout time and place since its inception. Spawning from an ambivalence towards “galvanism” and other emerging 19th-century medical advancements, The Monster has adapted to his changing cultural surroundings, eventually resulting in Boris Karloff’s misunderstood Depression-era corpse, Kenneth Branagh’s sensitive yet bitterly flawed creature that hearkens unto critiques against genetic manipulation technology of the 1990s, and countless other manifestations. (For an especially useful analysis of the monster’s transformation throughout time, see Susan Tyler Hitchcock’s *Frankenstein: A Cultural History*.) Highlighting the differences a monster exhibits between its expressed forms throughout time and place is an especially helpful critical thinking exercise and provides many avenues into paper-topic development.

Monsters are rife throughout almost every aspect of contemporary media: advertising, television serials, films, books, children’s toys, magazines, music, and any other number of arenas. Composition classes can readily harness the pervasiveness of monsters in popular culture, and forms the basis for my own freshman composition writing sequence. Exploring monsters in the classroom must push beyond the superficial; as with any other aspect of human culture, monsters are pervasive for a series of reasons. Aspects of both elite and folk culture must be taken into consideration. The rules, standards, and norms that characterize behavior exhibited in a given society are not only reflections of, but also influences on all art forms.

Michael Delahoyde of Washington State University approaches this issue from a literary standpoint and through his undergraduate seminar explores how monsters

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function as “dark-side representations of cultural values” (par. 1). Delahoyde’s seminar forms the primary basis from which I derive my own writing sequence. Questions concerning what makes certain monsters monstrous within a given cultural context, as well as discourse on the horrific effectiveness of particular monsters, also figure prominently. Delahoyde uses a variety of texts, spanning various media forms, though he does not sacrifice understandings of “literature as literature” in favor of purely cultural examinations. Rather, he employs cultural studies to add depth to a broader critical investigation of monstrous and horrific representations. Ultimately, his course is designed to expand academic literary discourse on this topic beyond a largely enthusiast-dominated genre.

Due to the rich and relatively untapped academic reservoirs of monsters studies as pointed out by Delahoyde, I have constructed an introductory composition class that capitalizes on monsters not only in cultural and literary readings, but also as explorations of the self, social fears, and a multiplicity of other issues. For example, the study of monstrous manifestations can be used to deconstruct societal attitudes towards hate. *Zombie* films are especially useful for analysis in this case. George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* martyrs its African-American protagonist, the only truly sensible character in the film, to a group of white authorities and vigilantes who cannot recognize him as one of the living. Though the course’s primary aim is in instructing composition, the example mentioned above and others like it will be prevalent in class discussion.

The sequence itself is comprised of five distinct papers that seek to solve the focus question presented at the beginning of the semester: what can monsters tell us about ourselves and society? This question is inherently self-reflective and is accessible to students from all cultural backgrounds. In exploring these phenomena with the framework that they represent repressed fears, anxieties, and embed themselves within the collective consciousness of their respective societies, students are given the opportunity to reflect on and “face their fears” in a meaningful manner. Foremost, this sequence is designed to assist in the development of critical thinking skills, to dig deeper into topics that students will most likely have only examined the surface of. Students will learn to apply this discourse on monsters to multidisciplinary concerns, considering the social, environmental, historical, and other factors pertinent to understanding cultural phenomena.

The first paper operates as an introduction to the inundation of monsters in all sectors of society, and serves to draw attention to phenomena that most people take for granted. Why is Frankenberry cereal so effectively advertised with a monster? Why are television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* popular? Why are monsters found everywhere, inhabiting a myriad of caricatures, attitudes, and

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states of being, from bubble-gum to films? The primary challenge that students face with effectively completing this assignment is in deepening their analysis beyond cursory explanations. These can include, but certainly are not limited to “monsters are cool,” “Monsters are frightening and therefore cathartic,” etc. The catharsis explanation is a start but will require more probing explanations. This assignment is intended to bring forth aspects of culture that are overlooked because they are in fact so common. I typically employ a handout, functioning as a discussion tool, that highlights the commercial pervasiveness of monsters, replete with images of children’s toys, soap, bowling advertisements, video games, movies, books, articles of clothing, and anything else interesting. The most successful undertakings of this project, then, avoid sweeping generalities or concrete answers to the pervading question. Rather, they focus on some specific aspect of the popular culture monster phenomenon and how it has been effectively marketed. Why, for instance, is it significant that monster bubble-bath is popular? One would think that Mummies and the Frankenstein’s Monster would fail in selling sanitation products -- walking corpses don’t exactly seem to promote good hygiene.

After exploring different areas of an intellectual space in which they have already been immersed, students will then undertake the second project of their semester, which involves an analysis of a particular monster pertinent to a culture other than the student’s own. Since the last paper focuses on popular culture, this research venture is designed to give students an outside look at how the rules, standards, and norms of a society affect its expression of the horrific. This assignment includes a research aspect, which prepares students for a more extensive library outing later in the semester. More importantly, this project provides a material framework for critical evaluations of cultural norms beyond superficial explanations. Essentially, the sequence moves from the familiar into the alien. The primary difficulty that students face is in avoiding making deterministic and sweeping generalizations about another society. I typically preface this assignment with cultural sensitivity training of some kind—a useful tool for writers regardless of any course theme. In addition, it may prove beneficial to provide resource suggestions and topical directions to students, sans exonerating them from a library expedition. Many students are initially overwhelmed by the breadth of possibilities, and even more so by the relative obscurity some of some monsters. Normally I do not require that students research their monster beyond an encyclopedia entry (though they may find plenty of other pertinent sources that directly discuss the monster in question). Rather, students should concern themselves with employing other sources—most notably those found in anthropology, history, and psychology—to support their arguments on the cultural significance of their monster. The Irish

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Dullahan, the Hawaiian Menehune, “Raw-Head and Bloody-Bones” of Irish folklore, the English “Spring-heeled Jack,” the Chinese Madame White Snake, and the North American Windigo have all been cross-cultural paper topics in the past. One student wrote about the Manananggal of the Philippines, a vampire-like witch who detaches her upper torso so that she can fly, arguing that the creature represents repressed post-colonial anxiety over the duality between newly adopted western mores and indigenous customs.

The first two papers primarily serve to orient monsters in a cultural sense; the following effort concerns societal projections of the monstrous onto others. Few other focused approaches can assist students so well in realizing the concept of “the other.” Monsters are the veritable embodiment of the other, especially when effectively portrayed. Shelley’s Monster, for example, is born as a near *tabula rasa* and due to the neglect of his creator cannot integrate into society. He is a deformed and profane creation, eventually turning to murder and fulfilling the societal expectation. Students must explore cognitive and social hierarchies, humans defining themselves based on what they are not, and the reasons for those distinctions. How does a given culture treat those who are not viewed as “normal,” and what monsters are reflective of this dynamic? *Beowulf* is a particularly useful text to supplement this unit. The monster Grendel is a “border-stepper,” living on the fens (neither strictly land nor water), who has no known father. By his nature, Grendel violates the norms of the warrior-society he attacks. Along the same lines however, Beowulf himself fights alone, exhibits super-human strength, and is unusually solitary. Thus, monsters are “othered” in differing ways, which serves as a useful model for student analysis and consideration of their own society’s tendency to classify some people as inherently different from the rest. Numerous paper topics can stem from this discussion. Many students explore issues of racism and privilege particularly well. How racism and ethnocentrism affect cultural projections of fears provide some particularly rich avenues. For example, one student of mine wrote about how certain racial stereotypes are directly reflected in particular film monsters. A recent submission argued that influential and intelligent monsters, such as Dracula, are primarily portrayed as white on film, while pathetic creatures such as King Kong are reflective of anxiety concerning people of color. Especially helpful in the overall scope of this assignment is Timothy K. Beal’s “Our Monsters Ourselves,” an article that explores how “religious discourse can serve political rhetoric in making monsters out of others” (B19). Beal points out that monsters “put a face on our otherwise vague sense of impending doom,” and reveal “our desire to find a scapegoat for our fears and anxieties” (B19), all framed in post 9/11 discourse. Beal helps students avoid the quagmire of orienting their topics with

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only the individual in mind, organizing their thoughts to regard a more collective framework of societal interplay.

In supplement to this assignment, I have students compose an essay outlining an experience in which they were regarded as a monster, taking into special consideration any instances or trends that may have labeled, or is labeling, them as an “other” in a particular social context. Analysis of the specifics and reasons for this stigma in these contexts is paramount. Again, going beyond superficial explanations will likely posit the main hurdle to surmount for most. One particularly effective essay recently was composed by a Filipino-American student, discussing her experience as a *Balibbayan* (an “Overseas Filipino”) on a visit to Manila. She argued that her position in two cultures made her a “border-stepper,” unable to fully identify with either tradition, nor fully accepted by either society. Due to the potentially sensitive nature of these topics, students may elect to create a hypothetical situation rather than imparting their own personal experience. Naturally, this prompt allows for more controversial topics, many of which result in sterling essays. However, I always caution students to consult me before treading down such darker paths, as poor handling of highly controversial materials is potentially disastrous.

Leading up to the final paper, students have explored their own reactions to the popular world of monsters, followed by a cross cultural examination, moving into a discussion of the other, and finally exploring what it means to *be* an other. The last paper synthesizes this pattern of assignments. The final effort of the semester will involve answering, significantly, the focus question presented at the beginning of the class: what can monsters tell us about ourselves and society? A portion of this paper operates as a reflective response to what students have learned -- to systematically bring in elements from each of the previous papers to form a new piece of scholarship. Students may revisit sources that they have employed in their previous research effort, though without simply re-using old citations; they must either paraphrase something different or analyze old thoughts from another angle. No matter the case, all roads must lead to answering the focus question. The primary challenge in answering such a broad problem is in narrowing the argumentative scope so that students can address some specific aspect of the issue. One particularly effective student paper addressed how the rampant commercialization of monsters reflects a kind of consumer scapegoating: consumers exercise power over what they are empowered to purchase.

Aside from their uses in the composition classroom, many other pedagogical approaches are viable when using monsters. My approach and Delahoyde’s are focused on English composition and literature perspectives respectively.

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Other disciplines have employed monstrous discourse in their curricula. In the anthropology classroom, Turnham A. Murad provides strategies on how effectively to handle the question of Big Foot's existence (787). Essentially, Murad introduces aspects of evolutionary theory, primate anatomy, ecology, paleontology, the histories of philosophy and science, and cross cultural considerations such as folklore, religion, and myth, providing students with the tools to critically analyze academic and enthusiast pursuits in explaining this phenomenon. Providing both physical and cultural evidence, Murad presents arguments from multiple angles and allows students to formulate their own conclusions based upon the presented evidence. Murad devotes an entire semester to exploring this topic, though the purportedly enormous primate is not the only monster's existence brought under scrutiny: the Loch Ness monster, the Abominable snowman, and others also receive attention.

As with any pedagogical approach, there are limitations and dangers in using folk or popular culture interest to fuel coursework for an entire semester. When exploring material that lacks immediately noticeable "serious" substance, it may be difficult in some instances to convince students that such topics are worthy of critical and academic consideration. More to the point, handling texts that may appear superfluous or silly might mislead students into regarding the coursework in general as easy or poorly considered. Worse still, it is dangerous to present material that students are acquainted with in that they may be tempted merely to uphold old stereotypes and assumptions. To my horror, one student came to the conclusion that since the Loch Ness Monster myth originated in Scotland, Scottish people are inherently more superstitious than Americans. Another defined a particular religious faith as "monstrous."

Although handling cases of racism and/or ethnocentrism in the classroom is difficult, these instances can actually serve as rich pedagogical opportunities. Rather than denounce students' writing and language, I point out that their stereotyping reactions actually serve to illustrate *how* monsters are used as scapegoats in a practical sense. Furthermore, rhetoric couched in academic vocabulary is never free from the potential of hate-speech. When students are made aware of this potential, they attain a new perspective on how to regard their own writing. Teaching students to analyze the significance and potential of their own language as a cultural construction greatly bolsters their rhetorical awareness and critical thinking skills in tandem. Revision strategies also benefit.

Monsters have many uses in composition beyond those presented in my writing sequence, and can easily avoid semester-long considerations. Smelstor and Weiher note that aside from teaching students to "deeply acquaint" themselves

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with “superficial knowledge” characteristic of popular culture, instructors are empowered to provide students tools that allow them to explore and recognize the uses of formulaic constructions, such as how horror movies are paced and constructed (43). Thus, while analyzing popular composition structures and their effectiveness, Smelstor and Weiher provide opportunities for their students to reflect on their own writing styles, a tactic that need not devote itself to a semester-long writing sequence. The social motivation behind the American proclivity towards romance novels can easily pair with a consideration of horror’s prevalence, for example, for a viable one-time paper topic.

Smelstor and Weiher’s strategy primarily orients itself in terms of what is popular to students. Monsters themselves are certainly not universally cherished as popular: in my experience, most students groan at the prospect of analyzing monsters for an entire semester. However, the organization of a composition class employing them as an area of focus need not serve as a breeding ground only for enthusiasts, nor should it alienate those students completely disinterested in monsters. Monster-worship, or the reverence of anything for that matter, is not the goal. The goal is to explore territory that students initially feel acquainted with in some degree, or at least assume is insignificant, so that they may broaden their interpretive lenses on and outside of their own worldviews. I always receive a batch of responses that follow a nearly clichéd pattern now: “I never knew that monsters had so much to say about society, and I never thought to dig as deeply as you made us.” I don’t believe I have ever turned any of my students into monster-fans or horror movie lovers, but this approach has allowed me to successfully provide them with tools that expand their critical thinking abilities.

Crossing the borders of normal pedagogical material in the composition classroom can greatly assist in vitalizing student involvement, and eventually their interest. Moreover, the topic of monsters as dark-side cultural manifestations provides a heretofore largely overlooked opportunity for students to explore and produce original scholarship. Breaking down “high” and “low” culture binaries is also a viable and hopefully constructive effect on student views concerning cultural texts. Ultimately, the study of monsters can lend itself well to critical dissection if presented and applied well. ✱

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