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Teaching with Monsters

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Since the beginning of the pandemic, I've offered courses that entirely focus on monsters or have a unit on monsters. In the fall of 2020 and 2021, I co-taught a course titled "Monsters in Film and Folklore," I've taught a study abroad in London in the summers of 2022, 2023, and 2024, called "Monsters and Magic," and I have had a unit on monsters in my supernatural courses, taught every fall since 2014. The monster has turned out to be a useful tool for discussing a variety of issues, including COVID-19, witch hunts and the demonization of women, and immigration. I'm reminded of Jeffery Tolbert's thoughts on Slender Man (a monster by all definitions) as a "flexible rhetorical tool," and I find that applies to monsters and monstrosity in general. The monstrous can be applied to most situations where there is Othering or fear of the unknown and most students quickly realize that often, the monster is made monstrous by us and that we, as humans, are usually the real monster.

However, I want them to take this analysis further—it is one thing to realize that we are the monster, but another to figure out what can we do about it. Typically we start with a deep reading of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," discussing each thesis and how it relates to something we're studying or experiencing. From there, we move on to Ebony Elizabeth Thomas' *The Dark Fantastic* where she critiques each of Cohen's theses from her own viewpoint, that of a black woman living in the United States where her blackness is often seen as monstrous. She argues "the implicit message that readers, hearers, and viewers of color receive as they read these texts is that *we are the villains*. *We are the horde*. *We are the enemies*. *We are the monsters*" (23). While the students can feel a little duped, after all I gave them a reading that we discussed at length, letting them pick their favorite thesis, they also feel empowered—many of them have the experience of feeling monstrous either because of race, sexuality, gender, ableism, or an intersectional combination of

additional ways they have been othered in their own experiences. Thomas's taking the viewpoint of the monster gives them another way to see the monstrous. What if we are the ones considered to be the monster?

At this point, I usually ask them, what is so bad about being the monster? Cohen—who, I remind them, is Jewish and has likely experienced antisemitism and been thought of as monstrous by some—also gives us potential positives about the monster. Monsters escape, they refuse categorization, they ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions, they are a type of desire. This is not to take away from Thomas's excellent points, but rather to reframe potential negatives as positives. After all, we fear the monster because we are afraid of the monster, more often than not, the monster does nothing to elicit this fear. What would happen if we loved the monster instead of hating it? Here, I often bring in discussions about genres such as paranormal romance, which are often not taken seriously, perhaps in part because they're thought to be a primarily female genre (see Kitta 2019, 69-93). In many of these books, movies, fan fiction, and other forms of media, the main female character falls in love with the monster. She rejects the idea that the monster should be feared and instead embraces the monster, often leading to conflict, but ultimately acceptance by at least some of the community. When I explain that the history of monsters is also sometimes the history of miscegenation, especially in many early readings of *Dracula*, these unserious genres of horror and paranormal romance suddenly become something very different.

Monsters can be a wonderful teaching tool for many different reasons and here, I list just a few ways I've used them in the classroom. They can be used to teach a variety of lessons, from exploring difference to self-acceptance, from understanding the Other to embracing that Other, to questioning the canon to taking fan fiction, horror, and other genres seriously. Monsters give us the space to explore difficult topics in less volatile ways and can ease resistant students into understanding difference. Monsters can give us the flexibility we may need to discuss difficult topics, but first we need to invite them in.

References

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