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ENG 4300-001: The Monstrous in Literature

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English 4300  The Monstrous in Literature
Fall 2001
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Texts: Beowulf, Shakespeare, The Tempest, Stevenson, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, Haggard, She, Conrad, Heart of Darkness, Morrison, Sula, Carter, The Bloody Chamber, Dunn, Geek Love, Donley and Buckley, Tyranny of the Normal

Goals: As a senior seminar, this class is designed to challenge and polish all the skills you’ve acquired as an English major. Each student will be expected to do independent research and reading and report on it to the class orally, and in a formal research paper. By the end of the semester, I hope everyone will feel more confident analyzing texts, presenting ideas to a class, and doing literary research.

From a theoretical standpoint, we’ll be doing “cultural criticism”: this means looking at both “high” and “low” art for the ways in which it reinforces and/or challenges its culture’s dominant values. Describing monstrous beings has long been a way for people to clarify their own cultural identity: all that seems most foreign to them is attributed to some self-evidently horrible monster. We’ll look at the role literary texts have played in this process of cultural self-definition. The result, I hope, will be, among other things, a clearer sense of the “monsters” that haunt our own imaginations and culture.

Halfway through the semester, the focus will shift somewhat to “freaks”: humans who have been ostracized or displayed because of their physical strangeness. Cultures tend to “enfreak” much as they create monsters: those things that most threaten the dominant sense of what a self is and how it can be categorized (male vs. female; animal vs. human; child vs. adult) are what define the “freak.”

We tend to absorb from our culture very distinct yet unconscious assumptions about what’s “normal” and what’s not. Looking at the ways in which literature can reinforce or challenge those notions of the “normal” (by opposing it to the “monstrous” or “freakish”) should give us a good sense of how literature, culture, and individual identity shape and respond to each other, as well as a deeper understanding of just how tyrannical unexamined assumptions about “normality” can be.

I do have a word of warning: the movie I’m thinking of showing and Kathleen Dunn’s Geek Love are very graphic in their depictions of people with unusual bodies and behaviors. If you are easily offended, you might consider switching sections. If you get halfway through the book and absolutely can’t go on, come see me to discuss alternative assignments.

This is a writing-intensive class. You may submit a paper written for this class as part of your EWP.

Policies: English Department statement on plagiarism:
Any teacher who discovers an act of plagiarism—"The appropriation or imitation of the language, ideas, and/or thoughts of another author and representation of them as one's original work" (Random House Dictionary of the English Language)—has the right and the responsibility to impose upon the guilty student an appropriate penalty, up to and including immediate assignment of a grade of F for the assigned essay and a grade of NC for the course, and to report the incident to the Judicial Affairs Office.

Plan to hand in papers on time. If you're having problems, let me know. Brief writing and on-line assignments must be done for the assigned class to be acceptable. Essays a week or more late will not
If you have a documented disability and wish to receive academic accommodations, please contact the Coordinator of the Office of Disability Services (581-6583) as soon as possible.

Come to class prepared. You'll have more fun if you've done the reading, and I will notice if you haven't. Note that a portion of the grade is based on class participation and reading responses—both of which require keeping up with the reading and (obviously) being in class.

**Requirements/grades**

- One brief essay (2-3 pp., typed) 10%
- One research paper (10-15 pages, typed, revised at least once): 25%
- Brief writing assignments/responses to reading: 20%
- Final exam 20%
- Two group presentations and one individual presentation: 15%
- Involvement/participation: 10%

Essay grades will be based on Guidelines for Evaluating Writing Assignments in EIU's English Department. I plan to use number rather than letter grades; this will convert into your final grade as follows: 91-100=A; 81-90=B; 71-80=C; 65-70=D; below 65=F

Because I grade on a 100-point scale, missing assignments affect the grade tremendously.

**Responses:** Almost every week, I'd like each of you to write a response to the reading. Focus on some aspect of the reading that intrigues you and develop your ideas about it into a page-long response. Feel free to include questions, personal opinions, and connections to other works read. At some point in the course of your response, include a direct quotation from the reading. The only other requirement: this must reflect your ideas before class discussion and thus must be handed in in class on the day the reading under discussion is due. I will evaluate the responses on a 10-point scale for thoughtfulness, depth, and precision.

**Group projects:**

#1: In groups of THREE: I'd like you to choose a kind of "other" and watch as many movies as possible (3-4) about that particular kind of "other." As you watch, take notes on any of the following that seem relevant:

- What does the "other" look like? Describe his/her body, features, speech. Does s/he have a particular ethnic, racial, or gender identity? What actor plays him/her? With what makeup?
- Is he/she treated positively or negatively? If negatively: is s/he demonized in moral terms (as evil)? In medical terms (as diseased)? In legal terms (as criminal)? In anthropological terms (as scapegoat or outcast)? Or does he/she work in more complex ways, serving as double or foil to another character?
- If treated in positive ways, what does the movie do to help the audience identify with the other? Are contradictions or problems in the other's life directly addressed or glossed over?
- How does the character's otherness relate to the movie's central conflict? What do other characters in the movie most fear will happen? Most hope for? Is there sexual tension?
- What traits characterize the hero/heroine? To what extent are these the opposite of the other's traits? To what extent do they mirror them?
- What conflicts were going on at the time these movies were made? What kinds of enemies and ways of thinking might the "other's" depiction echo? What cultural problems or anxieties might the depiction allay? Who directed the movie? How might the director's experiences or values be revealed by the movie?

Possible choices:
Mad scientists, mummies, vampires, criminals (Disney villains, for ex., or the criminals in old Sherlock Holmes movies, or in gangster movies, or cowboy movies), oversized animals (Godzilla, Rodan, Them, King Kong), witches, people with nontypical bodies.

#2: Again in groups of three, I’d like each group to choose a literary work not on the syllabus that relates somehow to the issues we’re discussing. If you’re not bored with the subject, you might look for one related to your movie research. Possibilities include:

Gardner, Grendel (monster), Rice, The Mummy, or Ramses the Damned; Interview with a Vampire LeFanu, Carmilla (vampire), Fairy tales about scary animals, Conrad, The Secret Sharer or Heart of Darkness (double), H.G. Wells, The Island of Dr. Moreau (mad scientist), Kafka, “Metamorphosis” Shelley, Frankenstein, Stoker, Dracula, Bronte, Wuthering Heights, Shakespeare, Macbeth, Doyle, Hound of the Baskervilles (criminal), Stories from Tyranny of the Normal or selected stories (ask me) from The Bloody Chamber (choose about 3 stories). There are lots of other possibilities—see me if you have questions.

Each group member is responsible for finding a copy of the work. As a group, decide how many pages you want to read for each class, then discuss during class, in preparation for a 10-minute class presentation in which you:

--Summarize the plot and give background information about author and time it was written
--Describe the “other” and explore whatever questions from group project #1 seem relevant

Group presentations will be evaluated on the basis of how clearly you present the material, how informative it is, how interesting you make it, and the extent to which you make interesting connections to issues and works raised by the class. All group members will receive the same grade unless obvious differences in effort are evident. PLEASE help each other, cooperate, and work hard so that this is a fun and educational experience for everyone—those presenting AND those listening.

Individual Oral Presentation: This is to be a 10-minute report on your research paper. Tell the class what your thesis is and how you are supporting it. Consider using visual aids or hand-outs to make your discoveries clear and interesting to the class.

Tentative Syllabus
Mon August 20: Intro to course; the Cyclops in the Odyssey
for Wed 22: Beowulf to p. 23 in Norton (I. 1248)
Fri. 25: Beowulf (response W or F) to p. 38 in Norton (1.2202)

Mon. Aug.27: Beowulf. (finish)
Wed 29: the Tempest
Fri 31: the Tempest (response M, W or F)

Mon Sept 3: labor day, no class
Wed 5: the Tempest
Fri 7: the Tempest (response W or F)

Mon 10: Essay #1 due. Begin Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
Wed 12: Dr J and Mr H.
Fri 14: Dr. J and Mr. H. (response W or F)

Mon 17: Haggard, She
Wed 19: Haggard
Fri 21: Haggard (response M, W, or F)

Mon 24: Haggard
Wed 26: Haggard (response M or W)
Fri 28: Haggard/group project reports if necessary (20 minutes apiece)

Mon Oct 1: Group project reports (2: 20 minutes apiece)
Wed 3: Group project reports (2: 20 minutes apiece)
Fri 5: fall break, no class

Mon 8: Poe, “Hop-frog” in Tyranny; Fiedler, “from Freaks” (Tyranny, 11-26)
Fri 12: Morrison, Sula (Response M, W, or F)

Mon 15: Morrison
Wed 17: Morrison
Fri 19: Morrison (response M, W, or F)

Mon 22: Dunn
Wed 24: Dunn
Fri 26: Dunn (response M, W, or F)

Mon 29: Dunn.
Wed 31: Dunn
Fri. Nov 2: Groups select novels

Mon. 5: Discuss
Wed. 7: Discuss. Bring tentative thesis and 10-item bibliography for research paper
Fri. 9: Discuss

Mon. 12: Group reports (4 or 5: 10 minutes apiece)
Fri 16: Carter. (response W or F)

Thanksgiving recess

Mon 26: movie
Wed 28: movie
Fri 30: movie (response M, W, or F)

Mon Dec 3: Oral presentations
Wed 5: Oral presentations.
Fri 7: Oral presentations. Hand in final version, research paper.

There will be a final exam during exam week.
Bibliography

Banta, Martha, and Curtis Hinsley. From Site to Sight.
Bogdan, Robert. Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit.
Cohen, Jeffrey, ed. Monster Theory.
--Of Giants.
Drimmer, Frederick. Very Special People.
Fiedler, Leslie. Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self.
Goffman, Erving. Stigma.
Graham, Peter and Fritza Oehlshlaeger. Articulating the Elephant Man.
Huet, Marie. The Monstrous Imagination.
Mannix, Daniel. Freaks: We Who Are Not As Others.
Russo, Mary. The Female Grotesque.
Sheehan, James and Morton Sosna. The Boundaries of Humanity
Slusser, George, ed. Aliens: The Anthropology of Science Fiction.
Thomson, Rosemarie, ed. Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body
Thompson, C. J. S. The Mystery and Lore of Monsters.
Twichell, James. Carnival Culture.