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ENG 4300-4390-002-098: The Monstrous in Literature

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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 to 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.

Within individual cultures, the “monstrous” is often equated with the “abnormal” and set up in opposition to the “normal”: 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.

Finally, cultures use monsters as a way of exploring the problem of evil. Such texts may approach evil from a variety of standpoints—religion, medicine, psychology, political science, sociology, philosophy. In the process of recognizing these strategies, we won’t come up with any answers, but we should have some very interesting questions to talk about.

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. Responses must be done for the assigned class to be acceptable. Essays a week or more late will not be accepted.

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.

Attendance: Given that this is a seminar, your presence and participation are especially important. 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. Excessive absences will result in a 0 for the participation portion of your grade.

Requirements/grades

Two essays 35%: one of 3-4 pp. (10); the other a research paper 6-8 pp. (25)
Ten responses to reading, other brief at-home assignments: 20%
Midterm and final 25% (10/15)
In-class writing; participation, presentations, and involvement 20%

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 and post it to WebCT. Focus on some aspect of the reading that intrigues you and develop your ideas about it into response of 1-2 paragraphs. Feel free to include questions, personal opinions, and connections to other works read. To get credit for your posting, there are 3 absolute requirements:

1. Quote a passage directly (and supply page number) at some point in the course of your response.
2. Post at least 60 minutes before class on the reading due for that class.
3. Attend the class for which you posted and be prepared to talk about what you said (don’t assume that just because you posted, everyone knows what you said).

I will evaluate the responses on a 10-point scale for thoughtfulness, depth, and precision.

For EVERY class I expect you to prepare the reading and come with notes and questions.

Group presentation: In groups of 2-3: I’d like you to choose a particular kind of “bad guy” or “monster” and watch as many relevant movies as possible (3-4). As you watch, take notes on any of the following that seem relevant:

Physical appearance, behavioral quirks, sidekick, weapons, motives
Adversary’s traits: who gets idealized? What qualities are associated with the “good guy”??
Key moments of conflict or horror: what images or actions seem to trigger the most anxiety?
To figure out what values a movie is conveying as a whole, think about how the audience feels at the movie’s end: who does it see as “good guys”?: Is it happy because a particular character came out on top or sad because he/she was defeated? If so, analyze what that character stood for or learned.

To think critically about those values, look at how the movie is manipulating your sympathies and blurring over problems or contradictions in its message. Does it sentimentalize by idealizing or stereotyping (e.g., the prostitute with the heart of gold)? Does it kill off characters who might complicate the movie’s outcome/values? Does it give depth and complexity to some characters while denying them to others?

Look also at the movies’ historical context: what conflicts were going on at the time these movies were made? What kinds of enemies or 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: mummies, vampires, Disney villains, oversized animals (Godzilla, Rodan, Them, King Kong), witches, aliens, people with nontypical bodies, shallow blonds, murderous women .

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.

MOST IMPORTANT: plan your presentation as a group so that you are able to synthesize your
findings. DO NOT, in other words, give 3 separate reports on 3 separate movies. Organize your
presentation by issue (good/bad guys, theme; or plot parallels, character parallels, contexts; or
similarities, differences) not by movie. It's not important that each of you spend an equal amount of time
speaking.

Individual Presentation: This is to be a 10-minute report on your research paper as part of a panel at the
English Education Conference on April 12 (SAVE THIS DATE NOW). Tell your audience what your
thesis is and how you are supporting it. Consider using visual aids or hand-outs to make your discoveries
clear and interesting.

Research paper: start thinking right away about what you might like to write about. Possible topics
include any text on the syllabus, other books about monsters, “bad guys,” aliens, scapegoats, or people
with nontypical bodies, or ANY cultural production that deals with an “other” or outsider or monster or
that comments on “normality” in some way.

Tentative Syllabus

I. Fantastic monsters
Mon January 7: Intro to course; the Cyclops in the Odyssey (hand-out); Jeffrey Cohen, “Monster
Culture” (hand-out)
for Wed 9: Shakespeare, Tempest (response #1 due W or F).
Fri. 11: Shakespeare, Tempest  Let me know with whom you’re working and topic for group project.

Mon. 14: Tempest (response #2 due M, W or F)
Wed 16: Tempest
Fri 18: Le Fanu, Carmilla

Mon 21: No class
Wed 23: Le Fanu  (response #3, W or F)
Fri 25: Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde

Mon 28: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (response #4, M, W, or F)
Wed 30: Doyle, Hound
Fri Feb 1: Doyle, Hound

Mon 4: Introduction, Bellin, Enframing Monsters (on reserve in library); presentation rubric
Wed 6: Groups #1, #2 present
Fri 8: Groups #3, 4 present

II. Bodies and Difference
Mon 11: Group #5, 6 (if needed). Susan Bordo, Introduction to Unbearable Weight (hand-out); Fielder,
“The Tyranny of the Normal.”
Wed 13: Hand in essay #1. In Tyranny of the Normal, Hawthorne, “The Birth Mark”
Fri 15: no class
Mon 18: Poe, “Hop Frog” and Carey, “The Quasimodo Complex” (Response #5 due M, W or F)
Wed 20: Kafka, “A Hunger Artist” and Bordo, “Anorexia Nervosa” (hand-out)
Fri 22: Raymond Carver, “Fat”

Mon 25: Weldon, *Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (Response #6 due, M, W or F)
Wed 27: Weldon
Fri 29: Weldon

March 3: Midterm

III. The Problem of Evil
W5: Lessing, *The Fifth Child* (Response #7 due W or F)
F7: Lessing

Spring Break

M17: Rushdie, *Satanic Verses*. Don’t forget Susan Bordo tonight!
W19: Rushdie
F21: Rushdie (Response #8 due M, W or F)

Mon 24: Rushdie (Response #9 due M, W or F)
W26: Rushdie
Fri.28: Rushdie. Hand in 1-paragraph topic proposal and 10-item bibliography

Mon. 31: Rushdie
Wed. Ap2: Movie
Fri. 4: Movie

Mon. 7: Movie. Hand in first version, research paper. Keep copy for yourself and begin preparing conference presentation. conferences
Wed 9: conferences
Fri 11: Prepare for English Studies conference Saturday April 12.

Mon 14: Angela Carver, *The Bloody Chamber*, “The Bloody Chamber” (Response due #10 M, W or F)
Wed 19: Carver “Courtship of Mr. Lyon” and “The Tiger’s Bride”
Fri 21: Carver “The Lady of the House of Love”

W26: Poems (hand-out)
F28: Review. Hand in final version, research paper.

There will be a noncumulative final exam during exam week.