January 2008

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Monsters: Classic to Contemporary Symbols

By Ashlee Bailey

Summary

This paper reviews different literatures that use Monster’s as methods to strike fear within the reader, and the characters in the story itself. Popular childhood monster stories are explored in terms of the monsters role in the story, and the monsters method of engaging fear into certain characters. The author poses personal questions for our readers; such as: what if you engaged in thoughts that could potentially deem you as a monster?

Introduction

Throughout time, monsters have emerged in almost every culture, such as the monsters in the Anglo Saxon poem Beowulf to Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein: A Modern Prometheus. We have also personally grown up with monsters, like those in “Are You Afraid of the Dark?” on Nickelodeon or modern horror films at the theater. According to David D. Gilmore, “Monsters embody all that is dangerous and horrible in the human imagination” (1). Furthermore, he contends that monsters are messengers of God, “directing attention to deviations from the true path” (10). Timothy K. Beal contends that monsters “are threatening figures of anomaly within the well-established and accepted order of things” (4). For Michael Lapidge, a monster is simply a creature “striking terror into the heart of men” (141).

Descriptions of Monsters and Fear

Although monsters come in a variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and cultures, their characteristics and actions similarly inspire fear within the heart of mankind. Monsters are uncontrollable creatures of the human imagination, inspiring fear through their gigantic stature; composition of repressed emotions within one’s self; and disregard for moral, social, and physiological structure. Monsters strike fear within our hearts because they are gigantic, uncontrollable beings. Imagine a gigantic monster, standing directly in front of you in your kitchen in the dark of the night. Hair-raising, blood-curdling fear begins to manifest in your chest, where your heart will start pounding rapidly. It will then spread to your legs, where you will be frozen in place, unable to do anything but stare at your looming death. Because you are unable to control the thoughts and actions of that gigantic, intruding monster, you experience extreme fear. Often, the boundary between order and chaos is defined by our sense, or lack, of control; thus, when confronted with something bigger and far more powerful, we lose our sense of control and become fearful of ensuing chaos. Percy Cohen explains that “all children have . . . experienced adults as higher than they are and have come to recognize or, at least, to suppose that greater height has much to do with greater advantage” (as quoted in Gilmore, 2001, 175). In addition to their “greater advantage”, Gilmore states that
“[the monster] embodies the existential threat to social life, the chaos, atavism, and negativism that symbolize destructiveness and all other obstacles to order and progress” (as quoted in Gilmore, 2001, 175, 12). Since monsters are larger and far mightier than humans, they evoke fear within us as they embody our weakness and threaten chaos to our orderly world. As children, monsters can be anything from the gigantic mud-blobs in our dreams to big, green monsters hiding under our beds; as we grow older, though, our monsters must grow with us, becoming bigger and more threatening to our control over our lives. In her novel, Frankenstein, Shelley demonstrates the need for monsters to be bigger in order for them to be more threatening when Victor creates a “being of a gigantic stature . . . about eight feet in height and proportionately large” (38). When the enormous creature appears ominously by Victor’s bedside with “one hand . . . stretched out, seemingly to detain” him, he realizes that the creature has a mind of its own and becomes fearful of it (43). After the gigantic creature leaves, Victor “[c]an hardly believe that so great a good fortune could have befallen” him, for he has regained his sense of control and avoided a troublesome situation (Shelley 45-46). Furthermore, Victor demonstrates the essentiality of being in control as he realizes that a similarly detestable, and giant, mate for his creature “might become ten-thousand times more malignant than her mate” and destroys the project (144). The monsters in the epic poem Beowulf—Grendel, his mother, and the dragon—are all of gigantic stature; also illustrating that as we grow into adults, our monsters must become larger and stronger. Initially, the “powerful demon” Grendel exerts control over the Danes for twelve years as he continually “raids and ravages” their mead hall (86, 152). However, the Danes’ secured control over their country “and soon all was restored” when the great hero Beowulf conquers the mighty Grendel (1787). Grendel’s giant mother then threatens control over the kingdom when she attacks the mead hall in revenge for her son’s death, but Beowulf is able to conquer her, restoring peace and security to the Danes. Fifty years later, a giant, selfish dragon threatens Beowulf’s control over Geatland, as it “burn[es] bright homesteads” in revenge for the theft of his treasure; nevertheless, Beowulf is able to defeat the giant “hoard-guardian,” restoring control over his homeland (2313, 2294). Even though these three monsters are gigantic and uncontrollable in their raids, Beowulf is able to redeem control as he defeats them. Monsters are gigantic, uncontrollable creatures, and to continue inciting fear within our hearts by threatening our sense of security, the monsters of our childhood must grow with us.

Are You A Monster?

When you become envious of your friend’s belongings, vengeful toward the driver tailgating you, or selfish when you have plenty, have you ever thought of yourself as a monster? The human mind is laced with repressed emotions that we cast onto monsters; by creating monsters with undesirable human characteristics—such as envy, revenge, and selfishness—we are able to justify them within ourselves, which also makes us fear them. Even though Michael Lapidge focuses on monsters as they appear in nightmares, he contends that they “are merely our own impulses and anxieties projected and objectified and personalized into creatures of the external world” (149). Gilmore offers a more in-
depth perspective: “As projections of inner conflicts, these terrible images reflect both repressed desire and their opposites: guilt, awe, and dread in which the person feels both violent repudiation and a desperate empathy, as the monster inhabiting the dark dream inspires both terror and identification” (18). Humans are fearful of monsters because they are our own repressed emotions and desires that could surface to take hold of our hearts and destroy us. Throughout time, humans have been taught to stifle jealousy, as it can lead to immoral acts that can destroy our peaceful, orderly world. In the Anglo Saxon poem Beowulf, Grendel is a monster of envy, hating, yet desiring, the Danes’ happiness: It harrowed him to hear the din of the loud banquet every day in the hall, the harp being struck and the clear song of a skilled poet . . . (87-90) When he is overcome with jealousy, he shows his hostility by assaulting and devouring those he meets in the mead-hall. By rendering Grendel to be an envious monster, the poet reveals the Anglo Saxon’s loathe of envy; additionally, the poet justifies this despicable feeling, which makes us fearful of its consequences if we allow it to penetrate our hearts. Furthermore, we repress the desire to act out of revenge because we have learned that all actions have consequences. Grendel’s mother is a vengeful monster, and assails the Danes for her son’s murder; but by acting out of revenge, she is defeated by Beowulf and ultimately loses her life. Because Grendel’s mother is a “monstrous hell-bride” ruthless in her vengeance, the poet acknowledges human’s desire for revenge, but also warns us of its danger, as it can be far more destructive to ourselves and others than simply resolving the issue. Selfishness, another repressed emotion, can thwart our attempt to cooperate with others and can actually lead to conflict. The dragon in Beowulf is a monster of selfishness: “He is driven to hunt out / hoards under ground, to guard heathen gold / through age-long vigils, though to little avail” (2275-77). When a piece of the dragon’s treasure is stolen, he could have easily let it go; however, selfishness seized his heart and caused him to burn and destroy the countryside. Again, the poet acknowledges that humans are inclined to be selfish, but repress that desire in order to cooperate easily with others and maintain peaceful order in our lives. Detestable emotions, such as envy, revenge, and selfishness, are capable of corrupting our secure world and producing chaos and destruction if allowed to surface; thus, by making monsters despicable human characteristics, we acknowledge and fear these repressed emotions as monsters.

Monsters and the Human Mind

The monsters of our imagination are also fearful rebels that break physiological, moral, and social boundaries and represent our own desire to overcome these boundaries. Gilmore claims, “The power of monsters is their ability to fuse opposites, to subvert rules, to overthrow cognitive barriers, moral distinctions, and ontological categories” (194). Foremost, monsters are terrifying creatures because “most often they are grotesque hybrids, recombinations uniting animal and human features or mixing animal species in lurid ways” (Gilmore 6). Gilmore explains that when monsters break physiological boundaries, they represent power unknown to the human mind and are physically uncontrollable. In her novel Frankenstein, Shelley illustrates the desire to overcome physiological boundaries when Victor Frankenstein pieces lifeless human body
parts together and “[infuses] a spark of being” into the gigantic creature (42). However, she also reveals that breaking physiological limits can be dangerous and threatening to our sense of control when Victor realizes that the creature had developed superior language and survival skills, far beyond an average human’s capability. Additionally, monsters are everything that is socially unacceptable to society, representing human’s desire, and fear, of behaving as we want. Society generally advocates that humans and monsters are adversaries, meeting only in combat; however, Victor’s creature defies social boundaries in opposition to most monsters, by desiring the love and compassion of humans and attempting to interact benevolently with them. Because happiness is a socially accepted desire, the giant monster Grendel, in Beowulf, also defies social boundaries by cursing the Danes’ celebrations. As they flaunt their cheerfulness, Grendel “wage[s] his lonely war, / inflicting constant cruelties on the people” (Beowulf 164-65). Grendel’s mother is also a rebel against social boundaries. For the Anglo Saxons, it was a woman’s duty to act as a “peace pledge” and “passively accept” her lot in life, even if that included the death of her brother and son like the mother Hildeburgh as illustrated in Beowulf (Chance 254-55). Yet, according to Jane Chance, Grendel’s mother breaks social boundaries by acting as a male retainer and actively taking revenge on her son’s murderers (257). Because monsters are socially defiant creatures, they illustrate that humans desire to break established social limits; in addition, we fear their actions because they represent chaos in our orderly, socially bounded, world. Finally, monsters are sinners—moral brutes defying all virtue and righteousness—who reveal our desire to act imprudently, thus causing fear within us. Victor’s creature in Frankenstein, is a sinner because he breaks two of the ten Christian commandments: “You shall not murder” and “You shall not covet . . . anything that belongs to your neighbor” (Exodus 20: 13, 17). First, the creature covets love and compassion that Victor is given from his fellow humans; however, as the creature realizes that all mankind shuns him, he murders Victor’s family to coerce him to create a complementary monster-mate that will care for him. In Beowulf, the monster Grendel initiates and continues a feud with the Danes for twelve years, slaughtering and devouring any human he encounters; he is also unrepentant and unconcerned about paying the death price to legally end the feud. Additionally, Grendel’s mother continues this theme of immorality by attacking the Danes for her son’s death, even though Christians are taught to resist acting out of revenge: “you have heard that it was said, Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5: 38-39) Although monsters are sinners and represent our desire to overlook moral boundaries, they cause fear within us as their sin reveals chaos and destruction in our orderly world. Because monsters are rebels against physiological, social, and moral boundaries the human mind acknowledges, but also fears, the desire to overcome these restrictions. Humans are fearful of monsters because they are gigantic, uncontrollable beings that embody loathsome, yet repressed, emotions and desires to overcome physiological, social, and moral boundaries. Humans fear monsters primarily because they are enormous, uncontrollable creatures, which pose a threat to one’s sense of security. We also fear these monsters be-
cause they are our repressed emotions, such as envy, revenge, and selfishness, which can produce chaos in our structured lives if allowed to consume our hearts. Finally, the monsters of our imaginations are able to rebel against and overcome physiological, social and moral boundaries, representing our desire to overcome these limits, but fear of the resulting turmoil. Throughout time and across the globe, humans have and will continue to fear monsters regardless of size, shape, color, or culture; rather, we will fear gigantic, uncontrollable monsters that embody all that is repugnant within us and break all known boundaries.

**Bibliography**