

Monsters in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching What Scares Us, ed. by Adam Golub and Heather Hayton
(Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017)

How do we teach monsters when the world we live in grows increasingly scarier? This question lingered in my mind as I was designing my own course on monsters for 1st year French students, in the context of the Vigipirate period that followed the terrorist attacks of 2015 and 2016.¹ The society we live in seems to be developing a ‘Gothic condition’, which David Punter describes as ‘one in which no excess, no transgression [...] that can occur to the dark imagination can fail to find its equivalent in the “real world”’.² This raises the question of how to invite monsters into the classroom while still preserving it as a safe place.

Monsters in the Classroom: Essays on Teaching What Scares Us successfully provides the answer, through twelve thought-provoking essays by experienced instructors who explore a range of methodologies and approaches to teaching monsters to college students, and even to high-school students. The essays have been organised under three general thematic areas that establish what the collection sees as the core functions of monsters: ‘Teaching Difference: *The Monster Appears*’, ‘Transforming Space: *The Monster Roams*’, and ‘Disrupting Systems: *The Monster Attacks*’. As W. Scott Poole highlights in his foreword, ‘monsters matter in making sense of human strivings and failings, [...] they are primary sources of personal and collective horrors, and [...] they live at the intersection of politics, history, desire, and meaning’ (p. 7). Therefore, to fully understand the message conveyed by the monster, we need to examine it through an interdisciplinary lens, without overlooking the context in which it appears.

Almost all of the instructors contributing to this book report students’ notable interest in enrolling in a course on monsters. Moreover, as the editors point out, in 2013, 65,000 people worldwide attended the interdisciplinary MOOC ‘Society, Science, Survival: Lessons from AMC’s *The Walking Dead*’ offered by the University of California, Irvine (p. 9). However, instructors do not simply teach courses about monsters because of their increasing popularity, but because the monstrous provides ‘a highly effective vehicle for teaching cultural analysis, fostering a critical imagination, [and] making interdisciplinary connections’ (p. 12). In other words, analysing the monster entails the examination of preconceptions, anxieties, and desires that our culture abjects, or rather, rejects.

¹ <<http://www.gouvernement.fr/vigipirate>> [accessed 27 April 2018].

² David Punter, *The Gothic Condition: Terror, History, and the Psyche* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016), p. 3.

In his essay ‘Teaching Monsters from Medieval to Modern: *Embracing the Abnormal*’, Asa Simon Mittman outlines his investment in teaching classes on monsters as a tool for questioning and queering categories as ‘constructs underpinning our culture’ (p. 20), since the monster simultaneously defines and uncovers norms that in turn define what it means to be human. By engaging his students in listing key terms connected to Patricia MacCormack’s seminal essay ‘Posthuman Teratology’, Mittman challenges them to identify some of the binaries and concepts (such as ‘(Dis)ability’, ‘(in)organic’, and ‘(Ab)normal’) that stand at the basis of social mechanisms (p. 26). This exercise (as well as the picture provided of the whiteboard containing the key terms) illustrates how Mittman used the monster as a starting point to encourage students’ critical thinking. In his classes, the monstrous brought to the surface the binaries that structure ‘our “Western traditions”’, which, in turn, ‘are the primary ingredients used to construct monsters’ (p. 26). Mittman takes the idea of the ‘monster as embodiment of difference’ even further by arguing that ‘if we ourselves are not examples of a legitimate “norm”, we cannot unthinkingly and reflexively reject others for failing to be like us’ (p. 30). Developing students’ empathy and acceptance of difference in others is probably one of the strongest arguments for inviting monsters into the classroom. This will hopefully prevent hate crimes such as the unprovoked attack on a goth couple in Lancashire in 2007, who were supposedly attacked because ‘they looked different. In the eyes of their attackers [a group of teenagers], they were “freaks” or “moshers”’.³ The couple was seriously injured, and one of them, Sophie Lancaster, died; the behaviour of the attackers was referred to by the judge as ‘degrad[ing] humanity itself’.⁴

Another compelling contribution is Pamela Bedore’s ‘Gender, Sexuality and Rhetorical Vulnerabilities in Monster Literature and Pedagogy’, which describes her capstone course that focuses on well-known monsters (zombies, vampires, werewolves, and Octavia Butler’s Oankali) in order to foster ‘discussions of sex, gender, power, and knowledge construction’ (p. 36). Among other approaches to monsters, her course (a detailed outline of which is given in the appendix) asks her students to consider the web of connections between the characters in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Bedore also encourages a feminist reading of Mina as ‘Dracula’s fiercest and most effective opponent’ (p. 39) precisely due to her liminality. This chapter usefully examines metaphors of the monstrous beyond those found in

³ Simon Usborne, ‘Robert Maltby on the Murder of His Girlfriend Sophie Lancaster: “The Goth Thing Was an Oversimplification”’, *The Guardian*, 15 June 2017 <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/15/robert-maltby-on-the-of-his-girlfriend-sophie-lancaster-the-goth-thing-was-an-oversimplification>> [accessed 30 April 2018].

⁴ Ibid.

literary and cinematic examples, and regards the process of writing itself as a monstrous process of (pro)creation. Jessica Elbert Decker also uses feminist critical theory in one of the three courses outlined in her contribution ‘Monsters as Subversive Imagination’. Decker’s courses analyse texts and films dealing with monstrosity from a philosophical vantage point, and prompt her students to focus on ethical problems as well as the construction of identity. In addition, Decker explores the promises and anxieties brought about by the rapid development of technology, challenging students to examine artificial intelligence through either optimistic or pessimistic lenses. This course effectively transcends the border between the classroom space and the virtual as students actively contribute with examples through forum-post assignments in the course’s Facebook group.

Elsewhere in the collection, Nancy Hightower’s essay ‘Creating Visual Rhetoric and the Monstrous’ explores grotesque monsters that elude our power of understanding precisely because they cannot be ‘named and categorized’ (p. 58). Hightower relies on examples from paintings and engravings (from Hieronymus Bosch’s *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503-15) to Goya’s *Caprichos* (1799) and Patricia Piccinini’s sculptures (2002-04)) that challenge students’ power of explaining or describing these monsters. The assignment for this course is particularly innovative; students are required to ‘create their version of the monstrous grotesque to question a hypocrisy in which *they* participate’ (p. 62), and to explain their creation in a short piece of writing. The photos provided in the appendix are fascinating depictions of students’ engagement with the monstrous on a personal, often cathartic level.

The second part of the book, ‘Transforming Space: *The Monster Roams*’, opens with Adam Golub’s essay ‘Locating Monsters: Space, Place, and Monstrous Geographies’, which proposes four modes of understanding ‘geographies when teaching monsters in the classroom: 1) monsters and the imagined communities, 2) monsters and nature, 3) monsters and the built environment, and 4) monsters and political geography’ (p. 92). Golub develops these approaches by referring to various monsters; for example, he employs Dracula to engage with the sense of community and its ‘others’, and King Kong as a representative of the dichotomy ‘between the so-called civilized and [nature seen as] primitive’ (p. 96). The built environment (an umbrella term under which Golub includes specific places like the mall, the house, and the school, but curiously not the city as a whole) is discussed in relation to Richard Matheson’s *I am Legend* (1954), with a focus on the idea that the protagonist Robert Neville is ‘homebound’ (p. 100) and othered, as the vampires have reconfigured the ‘suburban community’ (p. 99). Lastly, Godzilla is used to compare and contrast the American

and the Japanese points of view regarding nuclear-bomb testing and its catastrophic effects. As Golub demonstrates, in order to fully understand *Godzilla*, we must contextualise these texts and examine the geo-political origins of this monster.

Like Golub, Bernice M. Murphy also draws students' attention to the importance of the historical and cultural context for understanding a 'text's depiction of monstrosity' (p. 118). In her 'White Settlers and Wendigos', Murphy discusses using M. Night Shyamalan's *The Village* (2004) to encourage students to explore how the community of the 'presumably "civilized" European settler' (p. 119) is built on the negotiation of boundaries with its 'others', namely the creatures in the woods, read as standing in for 'savage', but ultimately not-so-frightening 'Indians'. Murphy also addresses a range of cinematic iterations of this trope, including Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), Larry Fessenden's *The Last Winter* (2006), Jim Mickle's *We Are What We Are* (2013), and the TV series *Hannibal* (2012-15), demonstrating how the figure of the Wendigo is employed to emphasise that it is 'the white man, rather than the Indian, who is seized by outrageous appetites, be they for human flesh, land, or [...] the natural resources contained within the wilderness itself' (p. 122).

Two thought-provoking approaches to teaching the monstrous as explorations of space and place are presented in Kyle William Bishop's 'Meeting the Monster through Experimental Study-Abroad Pedagogy' and Phil Smith's 'Using Zombies to Teach Theatre Students'. Although it requires a considerable amount of preparation and obviously a budget, Bishop gives the example of what is probably the dream of every instructor based outside the UK: organising a guided tour to visit the iconic locations that feature in Stoker's *Dracula*. It is predicted that such an immersive trip would have a positive pedagogical impact on students, as 'content becomes augmented by context' (p. 134). Meanwhile, Smith's account invites theatre students to take the place of the zombie and 'enact the binary of repression and return' (p. 147) by creating improvisations, without any prearranged scenario or any direct communication among the performers. Interestingly, the students involved reported a high level of immersion, a 'sense of freedom' (p. 151), and a nonverbal identification with the other members of the group, judging the exercise very useful for their future theatre performances.

The third part of this collection focuses on the monster's power to disrupt systems of belief, of community, and institutional systems such as high school. In his 'Studying Gods and Monsters', Joshua Paddison bridges the gap between the monstrous and the religious by approaching monsters as 'religious manifestations in the sense that they help people construct

existential meaning' (p. 162). Paddison's course not only challenges students to interrogate how American conceptions of the monstrous have changed throughout history, but also to explore the 'mysterium tremendum' ('a radically other mystery that brings on a stupefying combination of fascination and terror, wonder and dread').⁵

Brian Sweeney's contribution provides a critique of the American Common Core and its requirement that high-school students attain a 'College Readiness' that is inherently limiting and not at all consistent with the realities of college-level teaching. Sweeney designs a course the methodology of which is based on Wendy Doniger's 'macromyth' – the potential 'to see different individual, cultural, and historical responses to the same questions' (p. 199). In doing so, he explores iterations of the Medea myth (which features a monstrous mother committing infanticide) by focusing on the differences that lead to the application of monstrosity as a label. Here, Sweeney demonstrates how the monster can be introduced to the high-school classroom without necessarily teaching the critical material, but rather including it as a methodological tool.

Charlotte Eubanks provides a fascinating perspective on the monstrous and hybrid essence of learning a foreign language, particularly one with totally 'other' (for English speakers) symbols such as Japanese, while also addressing students' first-hand feeling of otherness in Japan. Similarly, Heather Richardson Hayton prompts her students to confront otherness in a simulated zombie apocalypse. Hayton's enactment of a zombie crisis, which the 'human' group of first-year university students needs to overcome, is a truly compelling exercise. It uncovers the (mis)function of a (relatively new) community when faced with the threat of consumption and contamination by the undead. The so-called zombie attack challenges university values (that implicitly serve here to symbolise humanity's values) and reveals tensions surrounding authority, gender inequality, the problem of those within the group turning upon each other.

As Jeffery Jerome Cohen's *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* informs almost all the courses presented by the instructors in this collection, it is only fitting that Cohen provides a fascinating afterword that echoes the seminal 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)'. This afterword ties together the past two decades, during which time Monster Studies has developed rapidly, as well as presenting seven theses relating to the idea of the 'Monster Classroom'. 'Thesis VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold of Belonging' is particularly interesting because it locates the monster as an interdisciplinary tool that 'invites a student to

⁵ Timothy Kandler Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 7.

frame critically their own cultural moment, as well as perhaps the long histories behind that moment's formation' (p. 234). If monsters populate and are reproduced in numerous novels, films, and videogames, bringing them into classroom discussions provides students with a better understanding of what ideas relating to thresholds and belonging entail.

The volume as a whole would have been greatly enriched by the inclusion of contributions on how the monster enters European or even Asian classrooms, as this collection consists of essays and course descriptions mainly from American universities, colleges, and high school, with the notable exceptions of Bernice M. Murphy's account of the courses she teaches in Ireland, and Phil Smith's theatre course in the UK. This reservation aside, *Monsters in the Classroom* is a well-edited and thought-provoking collection that features interdisciplinary approaches to using the monstrous as a pedagogical tool for discussing aspects of gender, race, sexuality, otherness, and other preconceptions that underpin our culture. Most of these essays provide detailed appendixes of course syllabi, which will surely be of interest to instructors seeking to re-vamp their courses, but also to teaching assistants who are struggling with the amount of theoretical material to include in the courses they design. Overall, the exploration of the monster's condition in this collection should help develop not only students' critical thinking and their representation of identity formation, but also their empathy, the very quality that, as suggested in Decker's essay, defines us as humans.

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