



## Anna Höglund, FANTASTICAL MONSTERS IN FANTASY HORROR

In my work as a researcher with a particular interest in monsters and the monstrous in fantastic fiction, I am often asked: What is a monster?

**My answer to that question is: a monster is *what we agree that a monster should be in different times and places.***

The definition and portrayal of monsters has therefore differed in the course of history. In this lecture I give a brief historical background to the conceptual history of the monster and present some distinctive features in the representation of the monster in fantasy literature, both past and present.

If you study the etymology of the word monster, you will see that it originally derives from the Latin word *monstrum*, which means something deformed, abnormal, or “against nature”. A deviation from the natural order, quite simply.

Beyond this, the word can also be traced back to the Latin verb *monere*, which means to warn or presage.

In the original sense, then, a monster was an unnatural and repulsive being that provoked fear, since it was often regarded as an omen, a sign that some great evil awaited whoever encountered it.

In the early Latin sense it was above all animals and humans with physical abnormalities or deformities that were called monsters. Physical malformations were viewed as a punishment, indicating that the gods were displeased with the behaviour of mortals.

In the Middle Ages, however, the terms began to be used more often to denote fantastic creatures of various kinds. These were frequently creatures composed of several different species, such as the minotaur, the siren, the chimaera or the gryphon. Some of the fantastic hybrids were probably inspired by real deformities in animals and humans, but embroidered with creative exaggerations.

If we consider the genre *high fantasy*, we often encounter frightening beings that fit the more original definition of monster as I just described it.

We can take the author C. S. Lewis's works as an example. Mythological creatures occur in these, such as minotaurs, cyclops, dragons and the Kraken. There is also an abundance of other fantastic creatures that can be recognized from the medieval definition of monster (i.e. unexpected hybrids of animals and humans) such as: the "vulture-dragon-man-monster".

In contemporary fantasy there are countless imaginative crosses of animals, insects, plants, humans and even artificial material. Today not all these hybrids of different forms of living and dead things are called monsters, even if they are evil. In this respect we have moved away from the medieval definition of monster.

During the sixteenth century the concept of monster was increasingly associated with size, chiefly denoting animals and creatures of enormous dimensions. The word also began to be used more loosely as a designation for people or creatures who were cruel and wicked.

When one considers the use of the word monster in early history, it is noticeable that there was a belief that a being with a deformed exterior is also deformed on the inside. The ugly outward appearance is a warning of ugliness on the inside in the form of evil.

That idea occurs, for example, in the works of Tolkien, where a repulsive exterior often reflects the evil internal nature of the character. An obvious example of this is the orcs.

Yet this idea began to be questioned fairly early in the history of literature, especially in the romantic era when authors like Mary Shelley (*Frankenstein and the New Prometheus*) and Victor Hugo (*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) opposed the notion that a deformed exterior is necessarily combined with inherent evil. Instead the romantic authors were anxious to make their readers empathize with the monster. Regardless of whether the monster was a capricious creation by God, as with Quasimodo, or by a human, as with Frankenstein's monster, it had been afflicted by a cruel fate for which it bore no guilt. It therefore deserved empathy.

Romantic authors also portrayed monsters who were beautiful on the surface but evil in mind. Examples of beautiful but evil monsters can be found as far back as ancient times, such as the siren and the lamia, but it was the romantics who began to explore the theme in depth.

In the romantic era there were also some authors, such as Bram Stoker (*Dracula* 1897), who incorporated an admiration for the monster's revolt against normality. There was something enticingly rebellious about a creature that did not follow the ideals and norms established by society. The outsider quality of the monster was sometimes depicted as enviable.

The romantics thus created much of the foundation of what I see as typical of our contemporary notions of what a monster is.

If monsters in early times represented what was frightening and symbolized everything that people did *not* want to be, today's monsters are more complex. The function of the monster in literature and culture has changed, and in the rest of this lecture I will give

examples of some of the more prominent features in the portrayal of monsters in contemporary Fantasy Horror.

In early fantasy literature, monsters were often depicted as dangerous and terrifying creatures that were a threat to the heroes of the narratives. It was the hero's task to kill the monster so that the world would be safe and harmonious again.

In fiction in our days we still undeniably meet monsters with that function. An example of this is "The Hollowgasts" in Ransom Riggs's novel *Miss Peregrine's Home for Peculiar Children*.

The Hollowgasts are monsters without a voice. In this way they are anonymous – a very common feature in the portrayal of purely evil monsters. This form of monster is described from the outside, often by its opponents, the human heroes, and the reader is rarely allowed to get close to the monster.

In the twenty-first century, however, it has become common for the monster to tell his own story. I would claim that this narrative device has been of great significance for the portrayal of the monsters we meet in our contemporary Fantasy Horror.

Today we often encounter monsters as the protagonists of the narrative. Instead of the monster being described from the outside by the hero and the victims of the monster, which creates a distance, the monster tells his own story, which gives nearness.

There are occasional examples of monsters who speak on their own behalf earlier in the history of literature, but it was not until the 1970s that authors began to explore this narrative device more extensively. An example of this is John Gardner's novel *Grendel* (1971). Here monster Grendel from the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* recounts his experience of the events described in the poem and discusses the nature of good and evil.

The 1970s also saw the publication of Ann Rice's novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1976). In the novel the vampire Louis tells of his life as an undead vampire. The work has set a style, and in this century's vampire literature we mostly meet vampires who tell their own story.

During the twenty-first century, monsters rarely associated with great verbal or intellectual abilities, such as zombies, have also been given an opportunity to tell their own story. This happens, for instance, in Isaac Marion's novel *Warm Bodies* (2010).

In the Dark Fantasy genre it has become so common for the protagonist to be a monster describing the world from its unique perspective that the term Dark Fantasy is sometimes used to designate narratives where the story is told through a monster's eye or eyes.

For this part of the course you read Neil Gaiman's "I Cthulhu", which is an example of one such Dark Fantasy. Here Gaiman has given a voice to Lovecraft's legendary monster Cthulhu, allowing him to describe his life in a more commonplace, not to say down-to-earth fashion than in Lovecraft's account. In Gaiman's version Cthulhu's primary task in

life seems to be to ensure that someone “remembers to feed the shoggoth” rather than to “bring madness and destruction to the world”.

Gaiman’s Cthulhu is presented humorously, and in his interpretation Lovecraft’s terrifying arch-monster becomes a rather kindly, good-natured creature and it is difficult to take his threat to return and “annihilate the whole of humanity” seriously.

Although it is not always the case that the monster’s own story lessens its evil, as happens in Gaiman’s “I Cthulhu”, the narrative device means that the reader comes closer to the monster and gets to know it. This enables something important: identification with the monster.

Especially in the twenty-first century, identification with the monster has become a common element in both horror fiction and Fantasy Horror. The reader is allowed to identify with monstrous beings which formerly, almost without exception, played the part of evil in literature.

To some extent, the increased identification with monsters can be explained by the fact that several monstrous characters, such as the vampire, have in large measure assumed the role of hero in today’s fantasy, especially in subgenres such as Paranormal Romances. An example of one such vampire is Edward Cullen in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight*. The identification is thus not with an evil monstrous creature but with a good one. The monster’s role has changed.

This does not, however, apply to all monstrous creatures that the reader identifies with. There are also countless more complex monsters who affirm their monstrous instincts but still invite identification even if the reader regards their evil deeds as reprehensible.

A primary component that is often present in the portrayal of monsters that are not totally domesticated but that one can still identify with is the theme of *exclusion* or *alterity*. The monster is an outsider, the Other, a characteristic that enables identification.

In Jim Casey’s article “Modernism and Postmodernism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* the author claims that fantasy is a genre that has always had a high representation of characters from marginalized groups (including monsters and other supernatural beings). In today’s postmodern fantasy, that element is even more prominent. There has also been a shift from describing “problems of knowing to problems of modes of being – from an epistemological dominant to an ontological one”. Postmodern fantasy is more about “theories of being” than “theories of knowledge”.

This is correct if one considers the monsters who are narrators in contemporary fantasy horror. They are often concerned with pondering on ontological and existential matters. The monsters are self-reflective and examine the conditions for their existence. They also do this on the basis of their position as outsiders, as those who do not obviously comply with the prevailing norm in society. They question and challenge existence in the world we live in.

The monster also offers alternatives. There is a clear tendency in dark fantasy and paranormal romance to describe the encounter of the human character with monsters as positive rather than negative. The meeting with the monster is rarely uncomplicated. It involves challenges of various kinds, and it is common for the human character to be exposed to deadly danger. The gains, however, amply compensate for the trials and hardships. The human protagonist acquires new knowledge, new worlds, and almost always forges bonds of friendship or love that give new meaning to life.

In their encounter with the monster, the human characters often become more self-reflective. Like the monster, they begin to question the state of the world. They learn to see taken-for-granted things in perspective and to view themselves from a distance. This is not infrequently taken to a head when the human character is transformed into a monster too, as occurs particularly often in Dark Fantasy. When each thus ends up in the other's "body" the questioning of human existence becomes even more urgent.

These elements of fantasy create a good foundation for a critical discussion of worldly existence, which makes contemporary fantasy well suited for "political readings" of different kinds. With the help of the monster in fantasy fiction, both the human character and the reader can contemplate themselves and the world they live in, which somehow makes the world more real.

An example of what it can look like will come in the third lecture on this course: "Political Readings and the Monster in Fantasy Horror".

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In this lecture I have given a short historical background to the phenomenon and the concept of monsters. I have highlighted some prominent features in the conceptual history of the monster and its representation in fantasy literature, in early times and in our own days.

I will close the lecture with a personal reflection which I think illustrates in many ways the development and function of the monster in our culture in the course of history.

On old maps monsters were often placed at the outer margins where people's knowledge of the world came to an end. The monster became a guardian preventing people from transgressing the boundary to the unexplored, to all that was frightening and threatening. My interpretation of this is that the monster's task was to prevent mortals from defying the limits to established human knowledge and deter them from increasing their knowledge of the world and of themselves.

In our contemporary Fantasy Horror the monster, if anything, has the opposite function. At least if we invite it in. Here the monster serves as a creature in whose company we can cross the boundaries drawn by humanity. The monster teaches us to meet the world of the Other with curiosity (and not infrequently with acceptance), and above all it helps us to view our familiar world with a self-reflective distance.