AN INTRODUCTION TO ‘MONSTERS’

Monsters and Storytelling

What is a monster?

At its most basic, a monster is a creature that causes us terror. It is something that goes against our expectations and makes us afraid. Our word ‘monster’ comes from the Latin word monstrum, which meant a sign or warning that the natural order of things was disrupted. Joseph Campbell writes that, ‘By monster I mean some horrendous presence or apparition that explodes all of your standards for harmony, order, and ethical conduct’. Another theorist, Noel Carroll, wrote that a monster needs two qualities: it has to be threatening in some way, and it has to be impure in some way.

Monsters and horror

Monster stories are generally part of the horror genre. A genre is like a family of texts – they’re all different, but they have certain things in common which make us put them in the same group. Horror stories try to frighten, scare, disgust, or startle their readers or viewers, by making us feel horror and terror. Common tropes (features) of the horror genre are abandoned areas, haunted places, innocent victims, darkness, blood, death, the supernatural, strong heroes, mystery, and – of course – monsters!

Why tell monster stories?

Human beings have been telling monster stories for thousands of years. We enjoy scaring one another and being scared. One reason for this is the same reason people go on rollercoasters: for the adrenalin and feeling of excitement.

Sources: wikipedia.org, http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd
that comes with being afraid. Another possibility is that, in our modern world, we need horror stories to remind us that (in the words of Elizabeth Barrette) ‘the world is not always as safe as it seems, which exercises our mental muscles and reminds us to keep a little healthy caution close at hand’ – so it’s a way of keeping safe!

Another big reason for telling monster stories is to help us explain our real, subconscious fears. In this sense, monsters are metaphors for our real-life social fears and anxieties: death, disease, chaos, conformity, slavery, mental illness, uncontrolled technology, hubris (extreme human arrogance), sexuality, political control and exploitation, immorality, terrorism, etc.

**Monsters and Fear**

So what is it that we are afraid of?

*The unknown*

One of the most famous horror writers was an American called H.P. Lovecraft. He wrote that the ‘oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown’.

This means that we’re afraid of things we don’t know about or don’t understand. Darkness is such a big part of horror stories because, when things are dark, it’s hard for us to know what’s there – the unknown is all around us. When you wake up in the night and lie in bed listening to things going ‘bump’ and you feel afraid, it’s because you’re afraid of the unknown. This is the power of ghost stories, and why strangers were scary when you were little.

Sources: wikipedia.org, http://public.wsu.edu/~delahoyd
Consequently, the scariest monsters are often the ones we never see directly. We see only parts of them, or only see evidence of them. If you’ve seen the movie *Paranormal Activity*, you know how scary a simple swinging lampshade can be!

*Boundary-crossers*

We are also afraid of things that don’t easily fit into categories – in other words, things that cross boundaries. As humans we like to be able to explain exactly what something is and fit it into a category: human or animal, bird or fish, dead or alive, etc. When we can’t, we feel afraid of it. Things that are partially one thing and partially another are scary, like werewolves (part human, part animal) and vampires or zombies (part alive, part dead).

This means we also fear things that come from ‘outside’ our world, such as demons or aliens. They have crossed a boundary and don’t fit into any of our categories.

*Cosmic horror*

All our lives we are told that we are important, and that we matter, both as individuals and as a species. Another type of horror called ‘cosmic horror’ focuses on the fear that this might not be true. The idea that we are tiny and small and mean nothing in the huge scale of the universe is quite scary when you’re used to feeling important and remarkable. Instead of being significant, we’re actually just tiny ants and the real forces in the universe don’t think or care about us at all – or even realise we’re there! Scary! Big monsters like Godzilla, Cloverfield, or Lovecraft’s Cthulu use this kind of fear.
Knowledge and control

In the end, a lot of these monsters are making us afraid of not being able to know or control our lives or the world around us. Human beings like to understand things, to have knowledge of things, and to have control of things. If we can’t know or understand them (whether it’s Dracula, Katikatia, or Samara from The Ring), then we can’t control them. We like to have power, and monsters make us feel very disempowered.

Human monsters

Potentially the scariest is when a monster isn’t a huge creature, but is actually just another human being. This is scary because it means that we might be surrounded by monsters – or, scarier still, we might have the potential to be a monster ourselves! The story of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde (or The Hulk!) is about this kind of fear.

Some of these human monsters are in real life. Serial killers like Jack the Ripper seem monstrous to us, and scare us with how little we can understand them.

Sometimes innocent people can even be made to seem like monsters so that they can be discriminated against. Nazi Germany, for example, made Jewish people seem like monsters so that the German population would support discriminating against, and eventually killing, them.