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ENG 4300-001: The Monstrous in Literature

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English 4300 The Monstrous in Literature
 Spring 2003
 Office hours: MWF 8-9; 10-11
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Texts: Sophocles, *Theban Plays*; Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Kafka, *Metamorphosis*, Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, Stoker, *Dracula*, Dunn, *Geek Love*, Donley and Buckley, *Tyranny of the Normal*

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. The result, I hope, will be, among other things, a clearer sense of the "monsters" that haunt our own imaginations and culture.

Halfway through the semester, the focus will shift somewhat to "freaks": humans who have been ostracized or displayed because of their physical strangeness. Cultures tend to "enfreak" much as they create monsters: those things that most threaten the dominant sense of what a self is and how it can be categorized (male vs. female; animal vs. human; child vs. adult) are what define the "freak."

We tend to absorb from our culture very distinct yet unconscious assumptions about what's "normal" and what's not. 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.

I do have a word of warning: the movie I'm thinking of showing and Kathleen Dunn's *Geek Love* are very graphic in their depictions of people with unusual bodies and behaviors. If you are easily offended, you might consider switching sections.

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. Brief writing assignments 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: Come to class prepared. You'll have more fun if you've done the reading, and I will notice if you haven't. 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. **If you have more than 5 unexcused absences, you'll receive a 0 for the participation portion of your grade.**

Requirements/grades

- One brief essay (2-4 pp., typed) 10%
- One research paper (10-12 pages, typed, revised at least once): 25%
- Eight responses to reading/in-class writing: 20%
- Final exam 20%
- One group presentation and one individual presentation: 15%
- Involvement/participation: 10%

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. Focus on some aspect of the reading that intrigues you and develop your ideas about it into a page-long response. Feel free to include questions, personal opinions, and connections to other works read. At some point in the course of your response, include a direct quotation from the reading. The only other requirement: this must reflect your ideas before class discussion and thus must be handed in IN CLASS on the day the reading under discussion is due. I will evaluate the responses on a 10-point scale for thoughtfulness, depth, and precision.

Group projects:

#1: In groups of 2-3: I'd like you to choose a kind of "other" and watch as many movies as possible (3-4) about that particular kind of "other." As you watch, take notes on any of the following that seem relevant:

What does the "other" look like? Describe his/her body, features, speech. Does s/he have a particular ethnic, racial, or gender identity? What actor plays him/her? With what makeup?

Is he/she treated positively or negatively? If negatively: is s/he demonized in moral terms (as evil)? In medical terms (as diseased)? In legal terms (as criminal)? In anthropological terms (as scapegoat or outcast)? Or does he/she work in more complex ways, serving as double or foil to another character?

If treated in positive ways, what does the movie do to help the audience identify with the other? Are contradictions or problems in the other's life directly addressed or glossed over?

How does the character's otherness relate to the movie's central conflict? What do other characters in the movie most fear will happen? Most hope for? Is there sexual tension?

What traits characterize the hero/heroine? To what extent are these the opposite of the other's traits? To what extent do they mirror them?

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:

Mad scientists, mummies, vampires, criminals (Disney villains, for ex., or the criminals in old Sherlock

Holmes movies, or in gangster movies, or cowboy movies), oversized animals (Godzilla, Rodan, Them, King Kong), witches, aliens, people with nontypical bodies.

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.

Individual Oral 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 26 (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 or outcasts (see bibliography below) or ANY cultural production that deals with an “other” or outsider or monster or that comments on “normality” in some way.

Tentative Syllabus

Mon January 13: Intro to course; the Cyclops in the *Odyssey*

for Wed 15: Oedipus in *Theban Plays*

Fri. 17: Shakespeare, *The Tempest* (response #1 due W or F). Select group project.

Mon. 20: No class

Wed 22: the *Tempest*

Fri 24: the *Tempest* (response #2 W or F)

Mon 27: *Tempest*

Wed 29: the *Tempest*

Fri 31: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (response #3 M, W or F)

Mon February 3: Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

Wed 5: Dr J and Mr H.

Fri 7: Kafka, *Metamorphosis* (response #4 due M, W or F)

Mon 10: Group presentations #1, 2. Essay #1 due.

Wed 12: #3, 4

Fri 14: no class

Mon 24: #5, 6

Wed 26: Stoker, *Dracula*

Fri 28: Stoker

Mon March 3: Stoker

Wed 5 Stoker:

Fri 7: Stoker (response #5 due M, W, or F)

Spring break

M17: Morrison, *Bluest*. Stop by to talk about paper ideas this week or next.

W19: Morrison

F21: Morrison (response #6 due M, W, or F)

M24: Morrison

W26: Hawthorne, "The Birthmark" in *Tyranny*. Gilman hand-out.

F28: Poe, "Hop-frog" in *Tyranny*; Carey, "The Quasimodo Complex" (*Tyranny*, 11-26) (response #7 due M, W, or F)

Mon 31: Welty, "Keela the Indian Maiden"; Bogdan, "The Social Construction of Freaks" (hand-out)

WApril2: Dunn

Fri.4: Dunn. Hand in 1-paragraph topic proposal and 10-item bibliography

Mon. 7: Dunn

Wed. 9: Dunn

Fri. 11: Dunn. (response #8 due M, W, or F)

Mon. 14: movie

Wed 16: movie.

Fri 18: movie. Hand in first version, research paper. Keep copy for yourself and begin preparing conference presentation.

Mon 21: conferences.

Wed 23: conferences

Fri 25: Prepare for English Conference Saturday April 26.

Mon 28: Discussion

W30: Discussion

FMay 2: review. Hand in final version, research paper.

There will be a final exam during exam week.

Bibliography

Adams, Rachel. *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*.

Banta, Martha, and Curtis Hinsley, *From Site to Sight*.

Bogdan, Robert. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*.

Cohen, Jeffrey, ed. *Monster Theory. And Of Giants*.

Drimmer, Frederick. *Very Special People*.

Fiedler, Leslie. *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self*.

Goffman, Erving. *Stigma*.

Graham, Peter and Fritz Oehlshlaeger. *Articulating the Elephant Man*.

Huet, Marie. *The Monstrous Imagination*.

Mannix, Daniel. *Freaks: We Who Are Not As Others*.

Russo, Mary. *The Female Grotesque*.

Sheehan, James and Morton Sosna. *The Boundaries of Humanity*

Slusser, George, ed. *Aliens: The Anthropology of Science Fiction*.

Thomson, Rosemarie, ed. *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*

Thompson, C. J. S. *The Mystery and Lore of Monsters*.

Twitchell, James. *Carnival Culture*.