

Monsters in Literature and Philosophy: Vampires, Zombie and Bears, Oh My!

“No one need wonder at the existence of a literature of cosmic fear. It has always existed, and always will exist.” H. P. Lovecraft

One of the things I like to point out to my Child and Adolescent Literature class is that children's books—but really all books—aren't about their “manifest” content. What I mean is—when you have a book about space aliens, and how a twelve-year-old child fights off invasion by learning to use an X-Niner Quark space-weapon or something, the book *isn't* teaching a lesson for children about what they need to learn for when the real life space beetles come and invade the planet. That's never going to happen. Or, at least we hope that's never going to happen. Or at least, really, the chances are so small of that happening in our lifetime that we don't need to write books to prepare for it. So, really, what are these stories doing? The purpose of these stories is teaching some other, allegorical or structural message. This is why one always needs to remember to read the Bible, for example, allegorically and not just literally. Jesus didn't tell the story of the Prodigal Son presumably just for that *one guy* in his audience who coincidentally has two sons, and one of them ran off, and that one son is coming home. “Here's a story for you, one father who just so happens to be in this one situation.” No, we all assume that the story clearly is intended for a larger audience, with a larger message. The story is *literally* one thing, but *figuratively* another. Medieval theologians said that any Bible story always had four meanings in it: Literal, Allegorical, Tropological, and Escatological. The allegorical lesson of the Prodigal Son is that things that depart will return, the tropological, or moral message, is “Parents forgive your children, brothers love your brothers,” and then finally there's even a more subtle eschatological message in there, meaning end-times, *the son will return*, Jesus will return. That's

what the story is telling us. These stories are *metaphors*; they are teaching lessons with larger applications. What is my point? My point is that kids learn to use the special weapons against aliens not because they're ever going to need to shoot lasers at aliens! Instead, what they're learning is "Hey kid, go to school! Learn how to read and write, learn how to use the technology around you, or else you'll grow up to be a loser."

So, stories about monsters aren't there just in case you personally happen to get attacked by El Chupacabra, or whatever. They represent something. What I'm going to argue today is that they represent something fundamental to humanity as we understand it, which is why monster narratives are so ancient in our literature, and so enduring. To make the point, let's cut to the chase. Let's start with one of the oldest of monster narratives, zombies. The zombie is really more of a film-monster than a literary one, but it does have an incredibly ancient history. The first zombie reference comes from one of the oldest texts we have ever, in the history of the world, the epic *Gilgamesh*, which recounts stories from almost three to four thousand years ago. Tablet VI contains a threat from the enraged goddess Ishtar. She says, "I will smash in the gates of the netherworld. . . . I will make the dead rise, and they will devour the living, and the dead will increase beyond the number of the living." Thousands of years ago, in some of the earliest writing we have, when in order to write something down, they're having to take the time and effort to chisel it into tablets, and they're *choosing* to write about zombies.

So, zombies are important. Now, otherwise, however, the zombie is a relative latecomer in monster literature. There are active dead people in the history of literature, but few would consider them zombies. For example, no one thinks of Odysseus' conversation with the dead Achilles in *The Odyssey* to be a zombie story, and the *Frankenstein* monster is only loosely accepted as a zombie by most people (more on Frankenstein later). One of the earliest *modern*

zombie narratives is a W.W. Jacobs 1902 short story “The Monkey’s Paw,” which is one of those “be careful what you wish for” stories, in which the parents of a recently deceased child use a wish to make their son come back alive, only to wish him dead again when he arrives, because he has returned in his newly dead, mutilated condition. It's barely a zombie story; however, the zombie itself never appears, except as a knock upon the door. (Richard Matheson’s influential book, *I Am Legend*, which has been made into a movie three times, contains a similar zombie-family-member at the door scenario.) Most of you know zombies only in film, even when they come originally from books like Matheson's, but there are plenty of these small literary zombie examples around, which have influenced many film and horror writers.

What is worth realizing about zombies is that again they're *metaphors*. Zombie stories in one sense are rampant in literature, in the form of various plague narratives that arose in Europe during the medieval period and were repeated over several hundred years. A close look at plague stories reveals a surprising detail—the messages and themes of zombie movies and stories are the same in the early plague narratives.¹ At its essence, the zombie literature is exactly the lesson in Giovanni Boccaccio’s famous *The Decameron* (depicting the Bubonic Plague of 1348) or Daniel Defoe’s eighteenth-century *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Plague stories and zombie narratives all explore the same anxieties: that civilization is going to collapse, that raw biological instinct will overwhelm everything we've built, and that mob rule will destroy our buildings and set our cars on fire. What happens in these stories is that the institutions holding our culture together, specifically *law*, *family*, and *belief in the sacred*, will break down or reveal themselves false. That's why zombie stories usually show some form of police failing to stop the zombies, or

1

Further development of the plague/zombie theme can be found in Jennifer Cooke’s *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film*, which treats the issue at length.

of the police and government officials being corrupt. These stories also often have bonds of family being challenged; some father is confronted with the problem of whether he should kill his zombie wife, or his zombie child, for example. Think about what that really represents as a metaphor. In old plague stories, the conflict was the same, but the choice was whether I should take care of my sick child or wife, when I know that means I might catch the disease myself. Zombie stories often show religion being corrupted (zombie priests and zombie nuns are found in many of these stories), which is really just our fears that our priests and pastors are human, just like us, and can be wrong about things. Finally, zombie stories are often about the fear of mob rule, with movies like the seminal zombie film *White Zombie* which contains a pretty clear race-metaphor about the fear of slave uprising, and many zombie stories often mirror real events such as the Los Angeles and Ferguson riots.

Ask yourself again, “What are these zombie stories doing?” These works are about the fear of collapse of our trusted institutions. By studying zombie stories, we can learn lessons that transcend superficial elements. Zombie fears address our collective uncertainty of origins, order, and understanding, or our fear of the decay of these things. Zombie narratives are focused on breakdown, on “death” as a symbol, and how breakdown, death, and uncertainty threatens humanity.

Zombies, then, serve as a pretty good introduction to why we should pay attention to monsters, though I want to move along now, because I have a lot of monsters to cover. Let's next talk about werewolves and vampires. I want to talk about them together because most recently most of you have been thinking about how they exist together, due to several recent film series, including *Underworld* and the *Twilight* books and movies. I'll eventually get around to talking

about *Twilight* briefly, though most sane people don't consider *Twilight* to be a series that is high-art or high-literature.

The history of the werewolf, however, is another longstanding one, going back potentially as early as Petronius, a Roman author from 2000 years ago. The mythological history of the Roman Empire is a wolf-narrative, though not a werewolf one. Many of you in the audience are probably most familiar with wolf stories, however, due to European folktales and stories such as *Little Red Riding Hood*. One of the earliest European werewolf stories in print is the twelfth-century Marie de France story “Bisclavret.” “Bisclavret” is a fascinating story. In it, an aristocrat, a baron, is a werewolf, and after he disappears from his wife during the full moon, she convinces him to tell her why. “Bisclavret” is a great story, but is kind of a sexist Samson/Biblical narrative, about how a man shouldn't trust the woman he loves with his secrets. After Bisclavret tells his wife where he keeps his clothes, she steals them, and having stolen the essence of his humanity, he can't change back from his wolf-form. The wife then goes off and commits adultery, and with her husband permanently missing, she remarries. But the story isn't over there. The king stumbles upon the werewolf in the forest and is impressed by how noble and non-animalistic the wolf is because it doesn't attack. The king brings the wolf to court where it continues to be gentle and nice to everyone, which goes on with everyone happy until the wolf sees his wife at court one day, with the new husband. He attacks them and tears off her nose. Now here's where you can see how these monster stories aren't meant to be literal, because what happens next doesn't make any literal *sense*. Imagine you were a character in this story. You might think, “Hey, that wolf finally freaked out. I knew it! It's a wolf! Why were we keeping it at court anyway! That's crazy! Kill it!” But remember that monster stories don't have to make sense on a real, literal level. They're about allegory, about unconscious desires. And they're didactic;

they teach us lessons. *Instead* what happens is that the king, not killing the wolf, is suspicious of the wife for being attacked! In the twelfth century, women get blamed for everything. But maybe that's not so different from now. We're still sexist today; it's just that the narrative is different. The wife must have been wearing a seductive dress, right? She deserved it; she brought it on herself! Anyway, what happens in the story is that the king is suspicious of her, so he has her tortured! She confesses all, Bisclavret is given back his clothing, and everyone lives happily ever after. Except, you know, the wife, who lives in poverty and all her future children are mysteriously born without noses.

Remember, again, that the *literal* truth of anything in literature is, to me anyway, less important than the *reading* one can make of it. In this story, we have many important lessons believed in the Medieval period that were taught to both children and adults in their folktales. The clothes make the man. It's important to dress as nobility if you want people to recognize you are nobility, and if you lose your clothing, you are “stuck” being less than what you are. Also at the same time, the message is *not* one of democracy. There's no social mobility here. If you are born an aristocrat, then secretly you'll always be an aristocrat. As in “The Princess and the Pea,” in which the princess is so noble and sensitive that she can sense a pea under twelve layers of mattresses, so too is the werewolf still noble and gentle even when he looks like a wolf. However, when we say “wolf,” what we really mean is “peasant.” In almost every werewolf story you'll ever encounter, werewolves represent animals and our animalistic side, but they really represent the lower class. They represent minorities, and the way that we, with racism and class-elitism, project our fears and hatreds outward. Think now of *Twilight*. In that story, the vampires live in a secluded, beautiful upper-class house. They drive expensive cars, their leader is a highly educated doctor, and there are European aristocratic ancestors, while the werewolves

are all Native Americans, living in lower and middle-class homes, repairing their own cars, driving pick-up trucks, and riding motorcycles. It doesn't get anymore metaphorical than that.

“Surely no, Steve,” you're telling me. Monster stories aren't all racist! Well, you're right, they're not *all* racist. But, frankly, a lot of them are. And to prove the point, let me talk about the origins of one of the earliest written vampire stories in England, which is not Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, but is a story from roughly one hundred years before *Dracula*, a John Polidori short story called “The Vampyre.” Polidori didn't come up with the idea on his own; some version of vampires has been around for hundreds of years in different folktale versions, but Polidori gave us the vampire in the way that is probably most familiar to us now, a deceptive aristocratic figure who comes to steal the lifeblood of our women. The origins of Polidori's short story are incredible, and there probably wouldn't even *be* the story if it weren't for a real life volcano that erupted in 1815. You may have heard this story before, because it's also the origin of *Frankenstein*. In 1815, the Tambora volcano, in Indonesia, had the biggest volcanic explosion in all of recorded history, pushing enormous clouds of dust and ash over the northern hemisphere for months. The event created widespread famine, flooding, and a huge drop in global temperature. Subsequently, 1816 was known as the Year without a Summer. At the time, young poet and aristocrat Lord Byron, one of the most famous English Romantic poets, was taking a European tour with another now-famous English poet, his friend Percy Shelley, as well as Shelley's young wife Mary, now known famously as the author of *Frankenstein*. But one more person on this trip was Byron's personal physician, a hired-hand named John Polidori. When travel became impossible because of the extremely cold summer, Byron and his group holed up in Geneva, and Byron proposed to kill time by having a contest to see who could write the best ghost story. He wrote a fragmentary story that he never finished about an aristocrat who dies but

comes back to life. Polidori took that story material and ran with it, however, with a twist.

Polidori was tired of spending time with Byron and his crew. By all accounts, they were not nice to him. Doctors at the time were not thought of in the same way they are now. We treat doctors with respect, but think, instead, of the idea of barbers. Doctors were previously thought of as people who worked with their hands, understood of as laborers rather than educated people.

Polidori spent a summer of being cooped-up in the cold in Geneva, being treated with subtle jabs and not considered part of the literary, artistic crowd around him, and he got fed up. The aristocratic vampire in Polidori's story is a thinly-veiled Byron, and the narrative plays on the fact that this deceptive, haughty aristocrat goes around ruining the lives of the women around him. Stealing their blood becomes a metaphor for stealing their virginity. Keep in mind that that summer, Byron was doing almost exactly what Polidori was describing in his story. He wasn't a vampire, but he was ruining a young girl's life. At the time, joining this group of writers and poets was Mary Shelley's step-sister, Claire Clairmont. Byron got her pregnant, but rejected any further relationship with her. Eventually Byron took the child, Allegra, and had her placed in a convent, where she died at the age of five.

Before you get angry at Byron for being a vampire-jerk (and there is a fictional novel that argues that Byron actually was a real-life vampire, by the way) maybe that's not the real story, just Polidori's version of it. Byron biography is a curious disciplinary field. I got my start as an academic writing about Byron. My dissertation, written almost twenty years ago, is about various Byron biographies. Some versions of this story depict Byron, not as a vampire, but as the victim in this story. Claire tried to use the child to insinuate herself into his life, writing countless letters and demanding his attention until he placed the child in the convent to fend off her obsessed

attentions. There are many accounts of women getting obsessed with Byron, sneaking into his house, stealing things from him, and forging letters in his name.

In fact, just as an aside, let me mention by way of giving a “Thank you” to Lamar that I have had personal experience with those forgeries. I have held Byron forgeries in my own hands!—at the British Library, when I traveled there years ago thanks to a Lamar University Research Enhancement Grant. The work resulted in an article in the *Byron Journal*, and it's thanks to Lamar University and its generosity that I was able both to contribute to the field of Byron studies and actually to touch those two-hundred year-old documents, not published anywhere.

So, there are some people who hated Byron, but perhaps they were just obsessed inappropriately. Polidori saw Byron as sinister. In Polidori's story, a cruel and deceptive aristocrat, Lord Ruthven (aka Byron), tricks the narrator into giving an oath that he will not reveal to his own sister that Ruthven is the living dead. As a result, Ruthven marries the sister, and she is found dead, drained of her blood. What are we to make of this story? Again, the point isn't what you need to do when real-life vampires come for you. The story is actually about real life events. And if you look at the history of vampire and monster narratives, you'll see it over and over again, that there is a metaphorical meaning. In the case of vampires, the monsters don't just threaten us; generally, the monsters threaten our young, specifically virginal daughters and women.

Dracula, in fact, one hundred years later, does the same thing. Perhaps the most significant vampire story written by Bram Stoker, *Dracula* was a popular book at the time and was the source for several popular movies later, notably the Bela Lugosi film in 1931. *Dracula* contains many themes and metaphors worth dwelling on, but the basic template was already

established by Polidori, a story about an aristocrat who threatens to steal and kill our women. And here let me explain something to you that you may not have understood about horror literature, and horror narratives in general. Most people think that when they're reading horror, they're reading something transgressive, and rule-breaking, and sinful. Monster stories are the kinds of things that we think we should be protecting our kids from watching. Nothing could be further from the case. Several famous horror critics, such as Carol Clover, in her book *Men, Women and Chainsaws*, explain you could even call the horror genre *conservative*. Why? Because these stories don't encourage people to break rules, they encourage them to follow them. Thanks to many filmmakers such as Wes Craven in the 90s, with meta-movies like *New Nightmare* and *Scream*, you're probably very familiar with this idea. Horror stories usually have a host of rules that apply to them, and if you break the rules, you die. So, don't smoke pot. Don't have unmarried sex. Don't go near the cellar door. Don't violate the rules your parents tell you, whatever they are. Many horror narratives are conservative because they teach you codes of behavior, they teach stereotypes of identity, and then they brutally punish everyone in the story who doesn't follow the playbook. These stories are comforting to us because of that familiarity. Not only do we know the playbook, but people have been telling us the playbook our entire lives. Structural critics like Vladimir Propp pointed out long ago that there are literally thousands of stories that replay these same patterns, such as our fairy tales and superhero narratives. Fairy tales are all about not leaving the path, not trusting strangers, remembering who people are because of their race or gender, and behaving accordingly.

Dracula is just such a narrative. In *Dracula*, our young British hero, Jonathan Harker, encounters danger when he travels abroad and does business with a European aristocrat. At the time Stoker was writing, literature was filled with fantastic stories, often concerned with

protecting the country from outside invasions. What was going on in the world when Stoker was writing his story? After a century of colonialism, the British Empire, which had enjoyed prosperity under Queen Victoria (the sun never sets on the British Empire!) was finding that indeed its sun was setting, and the country was awash with fears of other cultures and external invaders. Racist sentiment against the Irish, anti-Semitism, and prejudice against Romanians and other Slavic people were all staples of European cultural narratives that found their way into Stoker's book. The overarching fear, in this novel, is of a powerful aristocratic outside force threatening Britain with economic and other interests, finding some way to cross over the country's borders, take their money, steal their jobs, and breed with their women to destroy the country.

To put it another way, Mars Needs Women! But let's look specifically at *Dracula*. The only serious victim in the *Dracula* story is a young lady named Lucy, who stands in direct contrast to the real heroine, Mina. Lucy is a beautiful nineteen-year-old redhead, whose only flaw is that she's promiscuous. In the story, she has three marriage proposals from three different men who are all dating her. When she becomes sick, surely because of the vampire's nightly blood draining, the vampire comes to visit her in the night. Gee, I wonder what that could be a metaphor for? All three men give her blood transfusions. Eventually she dies and becomes a vampire herself. So, ask yourself, what does that mean? What is this story trying say? Again, it's not a *literal* story, teaching you how to behave when real-life vampires come to your house. These are metaphors. Lucy *mixes her blood* with three different men. The metaphor of her sharing fluids with them is pretty explicit, after all, but I might make an even more serious point. This story is concerned with the problem of mixed-blood and is trying to communicate the

dangers of it. The whole point is anti-immigration. Keep foreigners out of your country, because when you do have people with mixed blood they will turn into monsters.

How do you stop this mixing from happening? Well, it takes a good man to fight it off, but you might also say, to Stoker's credit, it takes a good woman, too, because there is a heroine in the story, Mina, and she's probably the most interesting, most compelling person in the story. A lot of critics have discussed back and forth whether *Dracula* is a feminist or a sexist book. You'll have to read it for yourself to decide, but certainly Mina is a brave, self-assured, and accomplished woman in the story, and while most of her actions aren't directly attacking the monster, the narrative makes it clear that without her enabling the male hero, nothing would get accomplished. Stoker is sometimes ambiguous in the story about how he feels about the "New Woman," which was the label for the growing feminist movement at the time, but the *Dracula* story clearly asserts that women can be strong, and capable, as long as they are not overly sexual, and as long as they support their husbands in whatever they do.

We could talk about vampires all night, and I do want to talk about them in a little more depth before we move on, but I want to warn you that I need to up-the-ante and talk about some of the most complicated material I'm going to talk about all night. And to do that, I'm going to talk about the least complicated story imaginable, the vampire narrative in *Twilight*. I know what you're saying, "*Twilight* isn't about vampires! I didn't even read those books, but I don't need to. The vampires sparkle!" And, well, you're right, most people don't think *Twilight* is good literature, and in fact, I am actually bringing up the story here to make a real point, that *Twilight* isn't even really a vampire story. It is, however, a monster story, and teaches some interesting lessons. Again, don't take these stories literally, but figuratively, metaphorically. In *Twilight*, we're not being taught what to do in case we have to choose if we want to be vampires or not.

There's not a lot of choice that actually goes on in the story. Instead, *Twilight* is a story that teaches that we don't have choices, at least not about destiny. The two lovers fall in love at first sight and have no possibility of loving anyone else. Even the werewolves “imprint” on one another and don't get to choose who they love. So, the story isn't about choice and freedom. Actually, the immediate lesson in *Twilight*, for those of you familiar with the story, is really, really obvious. And that is, “Hey you teenagers, don't have sexual relations until you get married.”

Whether you agree with that lesson, I think it's a pretty boring one for our purposes here tonight, so really I'm bringing up *Twilight* to talk about something else. I just told you I don't think it's a vampire story. Why is that? Well, I think it's actually just a werewolf story, and this gives me the opportunity to tell you what I think vampires really are, and hopefully that really is interesting. Talking about the difference between vampires and werewolves allows us to talk about the difference in Freud, between “instinct” and “drive.”² Werewolves are representative of instinct. They are non-conscious; they are animals. (We are working on the presumption that animals have no consciousness.) They operate on pure Demand, with no risk of interpretation. As animals, they have no language; they are outside of language. Werewolves are horrifying because they charge right in and eat everything. Vampires, on the other hand, represent something else entirely. They might seem on the surface to be just the same, because they threaten us, they want to feed on us, but in fact, they are quite different. It's important to remember that vampires do have language; in most vampire stories, they are very sophisticated, very human. One might say that vampires are the exact symbol of humanity. Aristocratic and noble, they are humanity at its highest. So, while vampires might seem on the surface to be

² These are different terms in German, “Instinkt” and “Trieb.” Freud's authoritative translator actually represented them both with the word “Instinct,” causing all sorts of problems in the history of reading Freud.

monsters just like werewolves (they eat people, they threaten us), that confusion is the same confusion that we have in our own culture between “need” and “desire,” between “instinct” and “drive.” In other words, yes, we all need food, but we use the need for food as our excuse to eat all the ice cream in the freezer, ice cream that we desire, but don't need. The difference between vampires and werewolves is that vampires are “desire,” not “need.” But very particularly (and this is important) vampires represent the *emptiness* of desire, how desire is about fantasy, about imagination, things that animals do not have. That's why, representing desire, vampires are invisible in mirrors. Let me give you an example from developmental psychology, specifically from a postmodern Freudian psychologist named Jacques Lacan. Lacan describes what happens if you take a six-month-old chimpanzee, and a six-month-old baby, and you stick them both in front of a mirror. What happens? Well, first, this is just a simplified version of this metaphor; don't go out and actually do it, since it won't work. But it works in theory. What happens is that a chimpanzee will see itself in the mirror, kind of play around with its reflection for a while, and then get bored. It will go away and eat a banana, or something. What happens to the baby? Well, it doesn't get bored. Instead, that baby will spend *the rest of its life* standing in front of that mirror, combing its hair, putting on make-up, shaving, trimming its beard, and a thousand other things that demonstrate a totally different relationship to images, to the world, and to itself. That's the difference between humans and animals. Humans are creatures of desire, animals are creatures of need, and that's the reason that werewolves and vampires are different kinds of monsters, because they represent different things. *Twilight* is a story about needs, and about restraining them when appropriate. That's why the vampires are visible in mirrors in those books, and they sparkle, because at heart *Twilight* is a werewolf story.

Now, look, there are a lot of counter-arguments to what I just said. First, I oversimplified Lacan quite a bit. Second, all you *Twilight* fans in the audience are probably angry at me right now. And you're right, the books are actually more sophisticated than that. But I don't have the time to address that. So, let's progress to one of the most famous monsters of the last two hundred years, the Frankenstein monster. Purists of the genre, incidentally, do NOT call the creature from the book *Frankenstein* by the name "Frankenstein." That's actually the name of the scientist in the story who created him. In the book, he doesn't have a name and is referred to as either the *creature* or the *monster*, depending on which version you're reading. And that's where things get interesting, because there are different versions of the book, and there are reasons to pay attention to which version you're reading. The novel was written by Mary Shelley, aka Mary Godwin, who was the wife of Percy Shelley, and who wrote it as her ghost story, begun in that contest during the famous year without a summer in 1816. But if you want to know what *Frankenstein* is really about, you need to hear a little more of the back-story first.

Mary Shelley was not just the wife of a famous author, she had a mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, who was also a famous author. Wollstonecraft first came to prominence in England in the aftermath of the 1789 French Revolution. Conservative authors such as Edmund Burke had written against the Revolution, and Wollstonecraft's 1790 publication, *A Vindication of the Rights of Man*, was one of the most popular rebuttals to Burke. It led to her publishing a groundbreaking feminist work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, two years later, which is the work she is most famous for. One of the major arguments of that *Vindication* is that we might not consider women equal, because they aren't, but that's not because they aren't naturally equal, it's because they aren't given the same opportunities and education as the men around them. Keep in mind that women at the time were only rarely given any education whatsoever. If they had any

schooling at all, it was usually just by virtue of sitting in the same room with their male sibling, if their parents even allowed that. Certainly there was no other real co-educational setting in most European countries, and where there were schools for women, they were mostly devoted to *womanly* pursuits, such as learning to sew doilies, learning to cook, or learning to play the piano. Wollstonecraft argued that women's education was key to producing a thriving, strong society, with equal partners. It was a groundbreaking work at the time, but unfortunately wasn't fated to have much influence. Wollstonecraft met and became the companion of another famous political philosopher and writer at the time, William Godwin. Godwin was a radical who wrote publicly about his disdain for the institutions of the era, such as the monarchy and the established church fathers. He was also against the institution of marriage, but when Mary became pregnant with their child, they married in order to ensure that the child would not be a bastard. He was mocked in the press for his hypocrisy. Then, tragedy struck when the daughter was born. Wollstonecraft suffered an infection from the birth, and, healthcare being what it was in 1797 (remember they were still bleeding people with leeches at the time), she died only a few days after giving birth. Her daughter, Mary Godwin then, who was to become our author Mary Shelley, never knew her mother beyond those few days, and only knew her later through reading her publications. Mary Wollstonecraft's legacy was enormous, but during Mary Shelley's lifetime, it was tarnished and problematic. William Godwin, loving his deceased wife, made a terrible decision. He published a book that was a loving memoir of her, a testament to her intelligence and beauty, *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The problem with the book is that he told the truth in it. He revealed that he and Mary had lived together prior to being married. At the time, while obviously plenty of people lived together before being married, to reveal in print that they shared a bed prior to marriage was scandalous. Anti-feminists proclaimed her a harlot. The book

was satirized and attacked. This is what results from feminism, many proclaimed, and even those sympathetic with the feminist cause immediately distanced themselves from Wollstonecraft and all of her publications.

You might be asking, “What does this have to do with *Frankenstein*?” My answer is that it has *everything* to do with *Frankenstein*. Most people read *Frankenstein* as a kind of *Faust* narrative, a man who practically sells his soul to the devil. You know the plot of *Frankenstein*. It's a story about a scientist who meddles in things that humans aren't meant to understand. It's not his place to be able to create life. It's an old story, the idea of Man pre-empting God's prerogative is maybe as old as the Garden of Eden narrative in *Genesis* or even older; so the story goes, there is some knowledge that is forbidden to us, whether it's knowledge of good and evil, knowledge of creating life, or knowledge of controlling fire. The sub-title of *Frankenstein* is *The Modern Prometheus*, which is a reference to the Greek myth in which the Titan Prometheus is punished for giving fire to mankind. In many of these stories, the idea is that knowledge and technology bring tragedy and sorrow, whether it's because seeking knowledge is itself transgressive, a breaking of a law, or because knowledge always means loss of innocence, a fall from grace. It's an old story, but it's one that the Romantic poets and writers were fixated on. That's not necessarily what is going on in all these myths. Many people argue that the Prometheus story and the Garden of Eden story, for example, are radically different from one another, but this idea of knowledge being dangerous is the usual way people read the *Frankenstein* story.

That's one reason, I presume, that film versions of *Frankenstein* have often shown a malformed version of the creature, starting with the 1931 version starring Boris Karloff, directed by James Whale, with the hideous, neck-bolted monster, even though in the book itself there is

no such negative, bizarre description. The first description given in the book is “His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful,” though there are elements of his eyes and skin that are described as “shriveled.”³ The thing is, it seems clear when you read the book, that the creature is meant to be viewed with sympathy. When the book was first published, that wasn't exactly the case. The first published version of *Frankenstein* came out in 1818, but that wasn't Mary Shelley's original written version. She wrote in Geneva, during and after her time spent with Byron and her husband. Before it was published, however, Percy took the book and made significant editorial changes, some of which are very important. First of all, he wrote a preface to the book, pretending to be Mary, in which he praises himself and Byron, proclaiming “a tale from the pen of one of whom would be far more acceptable to the public than anything I can ever hope to produce,” which is somewhat ironic, not to mention dead wrong, considering that probably Mary Shelley's work is the best known of anything those three authors had produced. But there are other and more significant changes. While Mary labeled the creature as a *creature* in the story, Percy often changed the word *creature* into *monster*. That significantly changes how the reader might perceive him. Percy made other subtle changes as well. He changed the ending to make it seem that the creature has less control over his own fate, as he is borne away by the waves, instead of forging his own path. Only later, in 1823, after Percy had died, was another version published that restored Mary's original text, with a newly written preface.

Here we have a narrative written by the daughter of one of the most famous feminists of the Romantic era, a woman who wrote a huge essay on how women needed education, and how

³ The description from which both of these quotations is taken is given in the second paragraph of chapter five in most editions of the work. The subsequent quotation from Percy could be found in the one-page preface in all editions of the 1818 version of the work.

the fact that their civilization oppressed them causes them to be the weaker sex. Suddenly we have her daughter, writing a story about a creature who is rejected by his parent. The creature tells us in the narrative that the only education he receives is by listening outside and overhearing another family teach the children lessons. The creature explains to Frankenstein in a long, several-chapter narrative that everything that has happened is not his fault, but rather the fault of his creator for not giving him the love, attention, and education that he deserved. Why is this creation a monster? The answer is not because he was born a monster, but because he was made one. The feminist reading of *Frankenstein* is clear. This story isn't about how knowledge is transgressive, or about how if you break rules there will be consequences. Or, perhaps it is a horror story just like that, but something else as well. It's a story about how women are made into less than what they can be by a sexist society that turns women into monsters to justify male superiority and heroism.

All right, what have we learned so far? We've learned that some horror stories are about race. Some horror stories are about gender. But let's learn more by jumping forward to the 20th century, to one of the most celebrated and influential horror writers of the genre, H. P. Lovecraft. Several years ago, I co-wrote an article with a library faculty member here, Jefferson Lacy, that was eventually published in the *Lovecraft Annual*, an article about his most famous story, "At the Mountains of Madness." Some of you may know Lovecraft, and others may not, but among horror writers he is well-known, and he is the inheritor of a tradition of horror writing called weird fiction that was popularized by Edgar Allen Poe in the 19th century. What is involved in weird fiction? Fiction in the genre often has untrustworthy narrators. They are not untrustworthy in the sense that they might be lying to the reader. Having a narrator who is untrustworthy in that sense is a tradition that extends back well over two thousand years and isn't necessarily a monster

or horror-narrative element. It's a staple part of Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, for example, where Odysseus lies to everyone, including his wife, his son, and his father. No, the kind of writing that Poe, Lovecraft, and others popularized more consistently implies that you can't trust your narrator because he might very well be insane. This insanity, which ultimately implies a lack of faith in sanity or reason itself, is an element that became a staple of gothic horror, involving circumstances that are so terrifying that they break the sanity of those who encounter them. Poe was a master at this, and Lovecraft, who praised Poe constantly in his letters and essays, carried on that tradition well.

Lovecraft is best known for his idea of “cosmic indifference,” and that's what I want to talk to you about tonight. I'll give you an example from “At the Mountains of Madness,” though it's common in many Lovecraft stories on some level. What happens in “Mountains” is that the narrator, Dyer, explains to his reader that his story is a warning. He is afraid, however, “my warning may be in vain.” The entire story is about his trip to the Antarctic, where he and others encounter horrific monsters, and the truth is revealed that the creation of mankind was only a kind of accidental afterthought, that vast, powerful beings once ruled the earth and might easily come again to enslave and destroy us all, if we awaken them. This narrative is typical of multiple Lovecraft stories. His narrators encounter frightening things, and they spend the entire story telling readers that they would be best served if they would all just stay away from everything. Don't go to the Antarctic. Don't go into the haunted house with strange geometries; don't listen to the otherworldly music you are hearing. Lovecraft was an avowed atheist, and the point to many of his stories is to teach a horrible lesson, that the universe doesn't care about you, and if you go poking around trying to make sense of it, it will come back to bite you. He created countless stories of people encountering powerful, otherworldly beings, “Elder Gods” as they are called in

his stories, but for Lovecraft, the point is that they aren't gods at all. They just happen to be vastly powerful, strange, and beyond our limited human knowledge. And therein lies the amazing irony of Lovecraft, which is that there are a huge number of fans of Lovecraft out there who seemed to have missed the point. Weirdly, they are fans of weird fiction yet they don't see anything weird about Lovecraft at all.

What do I mean when I say for them Lovecraft is not weird? When people read monster stories, why are they doing it? When you go to a horror movie, or you pick up a vampire story, you're doing it to be scared. You're deliberately scaring yourself. That doesn't exactly make any sense, although authors and philosophers have spent literally thousands of years trying to explain why that is. Why do we enjoy tragedies? Why do we seek out destruction and disruption? The point is that ironically people don't always read horror fiction to be horrified. Instead, reading horrifying fiction *makes them happy*. And there's the irony of Lovecraft. He's writing fiction that is meant to upset and disturb his readers, practically to drive them insane, to show them that the gods they worship are not gods at all. Monsters aren't special; they're just different. But what happened after he published his work was that a huge body of fans, authors, and critics began to love him, and to publish and to promote his stories. One writer, August Derleth, was so influential in promoting Lovecraft that an entire mythological framework has sprung up around his work, which you may have heard of under the blanket term of "Cthulhu," named after one of the horrific monstrous pseudo-gods in Lovecraft's fiction. Another Lovecraft invention that has become very popular is the idea of *The Necronomicon*, a book with unspeakable spells in it that, if toyed with, will release horrible demonic gods and bring about the end of the world. The comedy here is that Lovecraft's point seems to be NOT to worship these things, to be instead terrified, and yet his stories are beloved, and have resulted in countless copycat books, short

stories, video games, and movies celebrating Lovecraft's influence and writing, and promoting the idea of worshiping his so-called Elder God.

There are, however, people who seemed to have gotten the point. And this is what I wanted to spend some time telling you, just because I think it's a great insight to have about literature, plus I find it really, really funny. There are critics who hate Lovecraft, and for me the *great* part of that is that those people who hate Lovecraft are Lovecraft's ideal readers! The critic Glen St. John Barclay is a fine example of someone who understands Lovecraft's narrators all too well and therefore in some perverse sense, by hating Lovecraft, he is one of the few people who actually reads Lovecraft correctly. Why? Because, unlike most Lovecraft fans and critics, when he reads horror fiction, he is truly horrified by what he has read. Let me read you a slightly long quote from Barclay, so you'll get my point. This is Barclay attacking everything he can about Lovecraft personally and Lovecraft's writing style:

Lovecraft is an essentially tragic and ineffectual figure, possessed of virtually insane prejudices, and almost totally alienated from human sympathies or human experience, who contrived with the aid of a limited imagination to construct thoroughly artificial images intended to be horrific, but lacking any element of physical or psychological credibility to make them convincing. The fact that it is still possible to talk of a Cthulhu Mythos at all is due far less to Lovecraft's own efforts, than to those of three men without whose interested endeavors Lovecraft himself would be the most unlikely ever to have achieved publication.⁴

⁴ Barclay, Glen St. John. "The Myth That Never Was: Howard P. Lovecraft." *Anatomy of Horror: The Masters of Occult Fiction*. London: Weidenfeld, 1978. Print.

Barclay's reaction to reading Lovecraft is to produce a desperate frontal assault on all aspects of Lovecraft's abilities as a writer. His frenzy reveals that he truly has gotten the point of reading Lovecraft. He understands *cosmic indifference*. It terrifies him, and just like Lovecraft's narrators, it almost drives him insane. Also just as Lovecraft's characters, he desperately urges the readers not to pick up a book by Lovecraft at all, and just like Lovecraft's narrators, he marshals all the evidence he can to warn you away. Like Dyer in "At the Mountains of Madness," he desperately urges his reader to discontinue his projects, and marshals "evidence"—Lovecraft's poor imagination, Lovecraft's insanity, and Lovecraft's prejudice—to support his work. After reading Lovecraft, Barclay has, in effect, become a Lovecraftian narrator!

Before we leave Lovecraft behind, I want to point out one last thing about him, which is that I don't share Barclay's opinion. I think Lovecraft, despite his strangely ambiguous language and his supposed artificiality, is an extremely clever writer. And let me give you an example of just how subtle he is at blending form and content. In "At the Mountains of Madness," the story begins with the narrator desperately telling readers that they've got to heed his warning, and not fund any further expeditions to the Antarctic. The desperate fear of the narrator is one of the biggest anxieties of the story. But the clever part of it is this: think of the form itself that the story takes. If you are reading the story, it's already too late. The form of the story is a letter that is supposed to be read by people who have control over future expeditions to the Antarctic, expeditions that would be disastrous for mankind. However, regardless of when you or I first read Lovecraft, we are assuredly not one of those expedition organizers. The effect is striking. What I mean is, Lovecraft is trying to teach us, in the story, that the universe is indifferent to us, and that nothing we can do will ever have any consequences, because we're dealing with vast, powerful forces we can never hope to understand. That's what the narrative is about. And what

he's done is subtly given us a story in which we are powerless to do anything, because we readers aren't the ones who will be able to stop the expedition. When you read the story, the content tells you that you are powerless, but the *form* of the story, in the form of a letter that *cannot* be read in time, because it's not being read by the right people, backs up and supports that content.

I've got one more thing to discuss in this lecture. The title of my lecture included the phrase “Zombies and Vampires and Bears, Oh My!” It's a *Wizard of Oz* reference, obviously, but I still would be remiss if I didn't fulfill that last implicit promise. I want to talk for just a minute about bears, particularly because I have an article on bears that was just released in a book from McFarland Press. You might think bears aren't very threatening or monstrous. Me, I grew up with bears. Until I was thirteen years old, I lived in the Smoky Mountains, in North Carolina, just outside the Cherokee Indian Reservation. Bears were a pretty constant part of my life, but not in any threatening way. Back in the 1970s, before anyone cared about animal rights, bears were everywhere in town. Mind you, they weren't roaming free. For tourism, all along the streets there were Indians—that's what we called Native Americans at the time—who would stand beside teepees and wear big feather headdresses. Never mind that the Cherokee Indians never had teepees, nor did they wear feather headdresses. (That's what Indians out in the Plains did, not there in the mountains.) But teepees and feathers, that's what everyone in the 70s understood an Indian *was*, and putting on a big feather headdress for photographs is how you got money off the tourists. Well, those same Indians would have big chain-link cages with bears in them. It was horrible. The cages were far too small to hold these majestic animals, and the bears were decrepit, and underfed, and ragged-looking. Even as an eight-year-old, I could tell there was something desperately wrong with the situation. Well, now the bears are gone, and Cherokee is a much nicer place, albeit still a place where casinos allow them to take tourist money.

“But what about bears,” you ask? What I’ve found is that bears serve a great example of what monsters are to us. They are disturbing, powerful things that we manage to turn into stories that can comfort and entertain us. Let me give you two horrific bear examples. One is a gothic essay and one is a short story that first got me interested in bears. That essay was written in 1810 by a German author named Heinrich von Kleist, with the title “On the Marionette Theater.” It’s actually an essay that is more about puppets than bears, but I mention it because it has a startling bear scene in it. At the end of the story, the narrator mentions encountering a bear that fences. It sword-fights. You’ve probably heard of things like this before. There is a huge history—I don’t mean in stories but in the real world—of bears trained to fight, to box, or to dance for entertainment. What happens in the story, however, is that our narrator, “Mr. C,” is an excellent fencer, but he finds when he starts fighting the bear that he can’t win. The bear is never fooled by his deceptions. Let me read you a quote. “. . . [U]nlike any human counterpart would have done, not a single time did he go for my feints: Looking at me eye to eye, as if he could read my soul, he stood stock still, paw raised and ready, and if my thrusts were ruses, he did not even budge.”⁵ What’s odd about this story, the idea of a bear that cannot be deceived, is that it shows up elsewhere in literature. You may have seen it recently, for example, in the book and movie *The Golden Compass*, in which bears cannot be lied to, with the exception of one bear who can, but he is a bear who is trying too hard to be a human being.

What’s the point of this? The point is that the bear represents, for Kleist anyway, something innocent, something animals are in touch with that people are not. Kleist talks about the Garden of Eden, and how humans lost their innocence, now that they no longer live in the

⁵ Kleist, Heinrich von. “On the Theater of Marionettes.” *Selected Prose of Heinrich von Kleist*. Trans. Peter Wortsman. Brooklyn: Archipelago, 2010. Print.

Garden. Bears, not conscious, not having knowledge of good or evil, have another kind of knowledge altogether. That knowledge and ability, which bears have and we do not, disturbs Kleist's narrator, and scares him. That's what monsters represent for us, something disruptive, impossible, outside of our ability to either understand, or to defeat. My favorite living American author, Cormac McCarthy, ends his book *Blood Meridian*, which is a truly horrifying, violent bloodbath of a story, with another narrative about a bear. That story ends with a dancing bear, in a bar, who is shot for no reason at all, and bleeds out on the barroom floor. "Bears that dance, bears that don't," says McCarthy, and all human actions in McCarthy's book seem blood-stained, confusing, and ending in death and violence.

However, McCarthy ends his violent narrative on a strangely positive, upbeat note, and that's how I'd like to end here as well. At the end of *Blood Meridian*, we see a post-hole digger, who is scraping his tools against the earth, building fences, making order of an empty landscape, and McCarthy says he is "striking fire out of the rocks which god [sic] has put there." For McCarthy, who frequently writes about the land as empty of meaning, impossible and violent, it's an important moment. It tells us that we may encounter horrific, terrifying monsters in our life, that death and tragedy surround us, but in every person there is the capacity to encounter the divine, to build and order the world. There is a simple heroism to be found, not just in fighting monsters, but in going about the everyday tasks of life. Building fences, building homes. Robert Frost famously wrote "Good fences make good neighbors," and perhaps that's the point here that McCarthy is making. By doing our jobs, and by living our lives, we build our communities, and we create the sparks that make life worth living. Nothing could be more human, and less monstrous, than that.

