

Making Monsters: how the press decides who we love and who we hate.

Monsters. Dragons, vampires, zombies, ghosts, incubi, succubi: creatures of myth, folklore and superstition. It's easy to assume that in 21st century Britain, we have moved beyond the need to believe in monsters.

But have we? A quick glance to the popular press will produce many examples of what looks suspiciously like monsters. Serial killers, paedophiles and terrorists are frequently depicted in terms that makes them closer to monsters than to human beings, and if we look more closely at examples of these modern 'monsters' in the press, the more these people look like the monsters of tradition.

It is easy to assume that because these people did dreadful things, the depictions of them in the press are no more than truthful representations. Does it matter if people are depicted as monsters? In many cases, don't their actions make them monsters? I believe it does matter, and I will explain this by outlining one case of the creation of a monster, and look at the broader implications of this for our society.

Newspapers are selective in the way they report the news. They decide what the news of the day will be, report it to us, and decide what the slant on the story will be: good news or bad news? Good people or bad people? Heroes or monsters? Most of our most famous monsters are killers, but for each murderer convicted and denigrated across the front pages of newspapers, scores more are quietly tried and locked away with little fanfare.

Until recently, newspaper editors could decide with impunity who the heroes and monsters of the day could be. They could even be the same people, heroes one day, monsters the next: the parents of the still missing child Madeline McCann went from tragic heroes – parents doing everything they could to find their missing daughter, to neglectful monsters – parents who had abandoned their child and may even have killed her, even though the facts of the case remained the same. Sadly, public opinion all too often follows the lead the newspapers give.

To understand why and how this matters, we need to move back a bit – from newspapers, from the minutiae of language study to a more universal perspective.

As I have suggested above, all societies and cultures have the concept of the monster. The monster in this sense is rather like a Jungian archetype, something that exists in the collective unconscious, a primordial image that reflects basic patterns we share in common and that has existed universally from the very beginnings of civilisation.

The monster can also be found in the myths, the religions and belief systems of a culture, and in the folklore, the encoding of cultural mores and history in narrative, song and dance. Myth and folklore of all cultures contain gods, heroes and monsters

The archetype of the monster – the universal, recurring images, patterns and motifs that represent monsters – remain constant. Let's look at a very early monster and a more recent one.

The poem **Beowulf** exists in one surviving manuscript, dated around the late 10th early 11th century. It was composed much earlier and handed down through oral tradition. It recounts the exploits of the hero, Beowulf and in part his battle with the monster, Grendel.

The first appearance of Grendel, as he approaches the king's hall of Heorot to kill the king's men shows us a monster we can all recognise.

Ðá cóm of more	under misthleopum
Grendel gongan	godes yrre bær...

	him of éagum stód
ligge gelícost	léoht unfaéger...

Né þæt se ágláeca	yldan þóhte
ac hé geféng hraðe	forman síðe
slaépendne rinc	slát unwearnum
bát bánlocan·	blód édrum dranc
synsnaédum swealh	sóna hæfde
unlyfigendes	ealgefeormod
fét ond folma	

Then came from the moor under the banks of mist Grendel walking, he bore God's anger...

...from his eyes issued, like a flame, a horrible light... The monster did not think to delay but he quickly grasped at the first opportunity a sleeping warrior, tore greedily, bit into the bone-locks, drank the blood from the veins, swallowed great chunks; soon he had devoured the unliving one, feet and hands.

Grendel lives in an isolated, cursed mere. It is secret, guarded by wolf-infested slopes. The mere is dark, and no one knows how deep it is.

A more recent monster is the vampire (currently undergoing a rehabilitation from monster to dark hero in its depictions in Buffy The Vampire Slayer, the Twilight series and the True Blood TV series). Here is the vampire as true monster in Bram Stoker's Dracula.

Within, stood a tall old man, clean shaven save for a long white, moustache, and clad in black from head to foot, without a single speck of colour about him anywhere. He held in his hand an antique silver lamp, in which the flame burned without chimney or globe of any kind, throwing long quivering shadows as it flickered in the draught of the open door. The old man motioned me in with his right hand with a courtly gesture, saying in excellent English, but with a strange intonation:

'Welcome to my house! Enter freely and of your own will!' He made no motion of stepping to meet me, but stood like a statue, as though his gesture of welcome had fixed him into stone. The instant, however, that I had stepped over the threshold, he moved impulsively forward, and holding out his hand grasped mine with a strength which made me wince, an effect which was not lessened by the fact that it seemed as cold as ice - more like the hand of a dead than a living man.

What do Dracula and Grendel have in common? First of all, their appearance. Dracula is clad in black, with no trace of colour about him. He is described as more like a dead man than a living one. Grendel has flames issuing from his eyes.

They are creatures of the night. Both Grendel and Dracula first appear in darkness. Grendel comes from under the 'mist slopes,' Dracula is in his castle at night. Both of them show supernatural powers.

Dracula's castle is isolated, a long way from any settlements of civilisation. Grendel's mere, too, has these qualities. Monsters are outcasts.

Monsters can also be identified by their actions. Grendel tears men apart and eats them alive, Dracula, we find out later, drains the blood from his victims and steals their souls. Monsters are frequently associated with perverse sexuality. This is not an aspect of Grendel, but Dracula is depicted as having a sexual hold over his female victims. Incubi and succubi, for example, are sexual predators.

Writers have made use of our awareness of monsters for centuries. The monsters of literature share the same qualities from the snake of Genesis to the creatures of the Alien films. Writers can rely on our shared understanding to create meaning.

For example, the graphic novelist Jeff Smith, in his **Bone** series, introduces the monstrous rat creatures. The two we first meet have all the characteristics of monsters. Their appearance is strange and disturbing. They appear at night. They live in isolated places away from the towns and villages, and they kill and eat the people and animals that inhabit this world. But these two rat creatures also want to bake their victims in pastry to make quiche. Smith does not have to tell us any more than this. We know we do not have to take these monsters seriously. Real monsters don't eat quiche.



From **The Great Cow Race**, Jeff Smith

Newspapers, like fictional texts, make use of shared archetypes. By drawing on these, they can make implied claims about their subjects that can be hard to challenge.

A Case Study: Chris Jeffries

In Bristol in December 2010, a young woman, Joanna Yeates, was murdered. Joanna Yeates' disappearance happened close to Christmas, and there were CCTV pictures of her last movements on her way home before she vanished. She was an attractive young woman. The newspapers fell on the story.

In the course of their investigations, the police suspected, and subsequently arrested, Joanna Yeates' landlord, Chris Jeffries. Newspaper reports of the arrest pre-empted the process of justice, and created a monster.

The following descriptions of Chris Jeffries are taken from reports in *The Daily Mail* and *The Telegraph*. In the *Daily Mail*, Chris Jeffries is described as 'Wearing a long coat with fur collar.' Both newspapers quote an ex-student who described him as 'flamboyant' and as having 'blue hair' or 'a blue rinse.' None of this descriptive detail is relevant to the actual news: the story of a young woman's murder and the arrest of a suspect. They serve to suggest Chris Jeffries appearance is odd or different. A photograph of him taken at the time shows that his 'long coat with a fur collar' is actually an everyday anorak and unremarkable.

Monsters have very specific attributes and associations. They are linked with darkness and the night, and they are associated with sexual deviation and predation.

The *Daily Mail* makes the point that Chris Jeffries was arrested in 'a dawn raid,' and describes him as 'a luminary' which means a person of prominence, but can also mean a celestial object, which is more likely to be visible at night. Both newspapers emphasise the fact the Chris Jeffries is solitary. This is mentioned in both papers more than once. The *Daily Mail* describes him as 'a bachelor' and as 'an only child' who 'never married.' The *Telegraph* uses several interview quotes that describe him as

'a confirmed bachelor' (which is an early euphemism for homosexual.) The Telegraph also uses quotes that describe him as 'eccentric' and 'odd.'

Both news reports make a point of his interest in the poems of Christina Rossetti. Rossetti was a poet closely associated with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Rossetti's best known poem, **Goblin Market**, is a depiction of the erotic enslavement of a young girl by monsters (goblins).

Chris Jeffries, in these articles is, therefore a creature associated with the night. His appearance is strange and unnatural. He is solitary and he has a close interest in or association with a depiction of perverse eroticism. There may be an indirect claim that he is gay, a sexuality still seen by some as perverse or 'wrong.' In other words, Chris Jeffries is a monster.

Pragmatic analysis

It is not just in the descriptions of Jeffries and his actions that a monster is created. The newspapers were not allowed to state directly that he was a murderer, but language is endlessly fluid in the way it creates meanings. Jeffries was arrested after he gave information to the police about an event he had witnessed. Both newspapers use the verb 'claimed' in relation this statement. The Daily Mail says that Jeffries 'claimed' he had seen people leaving Joanna Yeates' flat, the Telegraph said he 'claimed' newspaper accounts of his statement gave a distorted version of this. The verb 'claim' carries presuppositions as to the truth of an utterance. To say that someone 'claims' something presupposes that the truth of the utterance is, at the very least, doubtful. Compare the difference between 'He claimed he saw something' and 'He said he saw something.'

Both newspapers flout the co-operative principle proposed by the philosopher Paul Grice. Grice suggested that, in conversation, participants will co-operate with each other when making their contributions. The co-operative principle contains four maxims. If these are openly and obviously flouted, then this adds meaning by creating implicature.

As has been discussed above, Jeffries solitary life is repeatedly referred to, in particular his marital state. He is a 'bachelor' and 'a confirmed bachelor.' The Daily Mail describes him as a bachelor twice, and also says he 'never married.' The Telegraph describes him as a 'confirmed bachelor' twice. Grice's co-operative principle contains the maxim of quantity: make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Both newspapers openly flout this maxim. This carries the implicature that there is something significant about Jeffries unmarried state. This significance can then be linked to the murder of an attractive young woman, a murder that was almost certainly a sexually motivated killing.

Further implicature is contained in the Daily Mail article in quotes attributed to the current Principal of the college where Chris Jeffries used to work: 'Mr Moore (the college principal) said there were no records of disciplinary proceedings against the former member of staff. "There was nothing in his record at all and he took early retirement, which he is perfectly entitled to do," he said.'

The lack of anything discreditable in Chris Jeffries record is repeated twice. First the newspaper reports it, then it quotes the current principal as saying it. The quote goes on to talk about Chris Jeffries early retirement with the further comment 'which he was perfectly entitled to do.' This is further qualified by a brief outline of the circumstances. 'When a new head of English came into the school he decided to bow out at that point.' There is no need to tell the reader that Jeffries was entitled to take early retirement. This is hardly an unusual or controversial act. The fact that the

Principal is shown emphasising this twice flouts the maxim of quantity again. Implicature is created by the unnecessary repetition that draws the reader into inferring there was something doubtful about the way Chris Jeffries left the college.

Chris Jeffries was never charged with the murder of Joanna Yeates. A few weeks later, a resident of another flat in the building was arrested, tried and convicted. Chris Jeffries was innocent.

Does it matter when newspapers create a monster? It's clearly important when an innocent person is misrepresented in this way. Eight newspapers, including the Daily Mail (but not the Telegraph) had to pay damages to Chris Jeffries because of their reporting. But what about when someone is guilty? Does it matter that men like Ian Huntley or women like Myra Hindley are depicted as monsters?

It does, because they are not monsters, they are human beings. We need to remember the actions human beings are capable of. We need to remember that in certain situations, human beings are often more likely to commit evil acts than to stand firm for good. It's easier, when reading about the massacres of the 1939-45 war, the terrorist attacks of 9-11, the abuse of prisoners at Abu Ghraib, to think: these were the isolated acts of monsters. But this is not the case. They were the actions of human beings.

We need to remember: this is a human being, and sometimes, this is what human beings do.

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