

CRITICAL THINKING AND BASIC WRITING

MONSTER THEORY

ZOMBIES / VAMPIRES / ALIENS :
WHAT SCARES US (AND WHY)?



Count Orlock from the film Nosferatu

READING / WRITING EXERCISES
MULTIPLE CHOICE TEST

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Panel from Jack Kirby's "The Demon"

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APPENDIX

Monster Theory Master Test

Sample Cadet Open Letter

List of Horror Movies

Three Act Structure

Excerpt: *The Raven*

Excerpt: *The Tell-Tale Heart*

To the Teacher



Sketch of Lt. Ripley (Alien). Art by Ridley Scott. Sci-fi-orama.

I have found monster theory to be an extremely rich vein to mine. If I can control the pace, my cadets will stick with this topic and write 4-5 essays on aspects of fear, horror, and movie-making (if I rush the material and overwhelm them, I get blank faces and dead class time).

My students have, like yours, seen thousands of hours of movies. They can respond well when asked to break down the components of good (or bad) movie-making. They especially engage when I can refer to specific scenes in movies they know, and how the moviemakers approached creating that particular illusion. The trick (I think) is to start small and sprinkle nuggets of fascinating information so they will follow the trail into really challenging thinking and writing.

I always have an international student who has never seen a slasher movie or heard of *Twilight*, so included are “open-source” lesson plans where students select their own stories.

I have attached links more advanced essays on fear and society, also breakdowns of the cinematic elements of good horror shows.

I have searched images which are either in the public domain or covered by the fair use doctrine:

“The 1961 Report of the Register of Copyrights on the General Revision of the U.S. Copyright Law cites examples of activities that courts have regarded as fair use: quotation of excerpts in a review or criticism for purposes of illustration or comment; quotation of short passages in a scholarly or technical work, for illustration or clarification of the author’s observations; ... reproduction by a teacher or student of a small part of a work to illustrate a lesson.”

That is, I only use images which are reviewed in the accompanying critical text, reproducing only small parts of works in order to illustrate the lesson plans. .

-- *Tom Durwood*
Valley Forge, PA

FOUR THEORIES OF FEAR

The Psychology of Fear

Tom Durwood



Still from John Carpenter's *The Fog* (1981)

What is fear? Why do dark stairwells scare us? Why did *Psycho* give me nightmares, while my cousin Mike just laughed at the shower scene? Why do different cultures create different monsters? There are a number of theories about fear. Here are four:

1) Sigmund Freud, the Austrian father of psychoanalysis, contrasts “real” fears with “neurotic” fears, which we invent ourselves. *Real* fears stem from external dangers – falling off a cliff, being burned by fire, getting lost in the woods at night:

Real fear seems quite rational and comprehensible to us. We may testify that it is a reaction to the perception of external danger – that is, harm that is expected and foreseen. It is related to the flight reflex and may be regarded as an expression of the instinct of self-preservation.

Neurotic fears are not about actual danger but personal phobias, which often make no sense:

Just listen to all the things which may become the objects of contents of a phobia: darkness, open air, open squares, cats, spiders, caterpillars, snakes, mice, thunder-storms, sharp points, blood, enclosed spaces, crowds, solitude, passing over a bridge, travel on land and sea, etc.

We get these neurotic fears, Freud says, from some experience in our childhood. We have repressed or pushed down into our lower minds (or subconscious) certain unpleasant memories which then pop up again as fears. Confronting these personal demons may be the best way to make them disappear.

2) Carl Jung (Freud's brilliant pupil) put forward the idea that we are scared of the darker emotions which lurk within us – our “shadow selves.” The powerful urges for sex and aggression which we are constantly struggling to control burst forth in dreams and in horror stories. The depictions of monsters we seem to like (even though they scare us) are actually depictions of us losing control of our own “base” instincts. We fear our own desires.

The Hulk, all werewolves, Jack Kirby's *Demon* comic book and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (polite doctor by day, maniac by night) can all be seen as expression of the “beast within.” The stories are showing us what happens when the savage urges within us are turned loose. It is interesting that these are stories about males – do females not fear losing control?

Under this theory, you might see scenarios of fear as a breaking of taboos. Slasher movies, for example, where we kill everyone who was ever mean to us at summer camp, are simply a playing-out of the anger each of hides deep within. Inner rage gone rampant – now *that* is scary. In a slasher movie, the monster is breaking down the illusion of politeness that we all maintain. The story of *Frankenstein* – where a man is brought back from the dead by weird science -- is breaking the important “taboo” line between life and death.

3) **The “social layer” theory of fear** says that horror stories get their scare factor from group or collective fears that we share together. For instance, we are all scared of AIDS but do not like to talk about it: a movie like *28 Weeks*, where a virus turns everyone in our town into deadly zombies – *One touch and you're infected!* -- is a powerful expression of our group fear of AIDS. In a famous monster movie from the 1950's called *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the hero's friends and family woke up one morning turned into alien “pod” people – they looked the same, but their souls were gone. They wanted only to destroy America. This is often seen as the fear of Communism which was so widespread during that decade – the idea that our neighbors might secretly be turning into communists (pod people).

4) **Monsters can also be seen as figures of The Other** – the immigrant, the terrorist, the mentally ill son of our neighbor whom we do not really know. Some critics say the *Halloween* movies are simply an exaggerated version of how we feel about patients of the mental hospitals in our towns. While all literature shows the inner workings and motivations of our heroes, it tends to ignore those of the Other. We rarely see the Other's point of view.

My brief and simplified summaries may help give you ideas as you form your own theory of fear. Here are several in-depth treatments of the topic which you can find online if you want to read more:

- *The Five Basic Fears We Live By*, by Karl Albrecht (*Psychology Today*)
- *Introduction to Jung's Psychology* by Frieda Fordham
- *Introduction to Sigmund Freud's Theory of Dreams* by K. Wilson

READING #2 CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT LITERATURE

Vampires

EACH GENERATION HAS A NEW VERSION



Bela Lugosi in an early portrayal of Dracula

Why do we like being scared by vampires so much?

“Every age embraces the vampire it needs,” writes author Nina Auerbach in her book *Our Vampires, Ourselves*. Vampires were extremely alien and extremely deadly monsters when they first appeared in Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel “Dracula.” Bram Stoker would not recognize the friendly teen vampires (like Edward Cullen in the “Twilight” series) of today. Why have we changed the way we imagine vampires? What is their basic appeal? Here are four concepts that have been applied to this topic:

1) Vampires are all about religion – specifically, all the bad things that happen if society strays away from the Church. Vampires are sinners, vampires are our or lost fallen brothers who live lives with no moral meaning. Vampires are so compelling, this theory goes, because represent pure Godlessness. Since they are the counter- religious devils, they can be warded off with Bibles, holy water, and crosses. Closely following the ritualistic life of the Church enables us to avoid becoming vampires.

In recent years, the traditional vampire has changed to reflect America's complex association with these principles.

2) Vampires represent our anxieties about sex. They are figures who act out our combined thrill and fear about coming of sexual age. The Bram Stoker *Dracula* reached its popularity at the height of the Victorian age, when sex was hidden beneath prim attitudes and layers of formal clothing. That *Dracula* would appear suddenly in the open window of a pretty teenage girl's bedroom, and attack her in her bed. *Yikes!* The idea of a monster representing repressed sexuality would certainly appeal to Sigmund Freud. He wrote, "All human experiences of morbid dread signify the presence of repressed sexual and aggressive wishes, and in vampirism we see these repressed wishes becoming plainly visible." We are afraid of our own powerful desires. The idea is that if vampires win, then we face a society where our own sexuality runs wild.

The original *Dracula* (like sex in the Victorian era) was not seen much – the story carried on all around him, but the monster himself only appeared briefly and violently. Edward Cullen's scare factor is much lower – he is more like a misunderstood boyfriend. Now we are comfortable with the whole notion of sex, so our vampire monster is part of everyday world. In the *Twilight* stories, we chat with the moody young vampire Edward Cullen in our school cafeteria, we go to parties at his house. He has changed from a ruthless bloodsucking villain to a romantic figure who displays feelings, fears, hope, dreams and sadness.

In this light, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* shows how far society has come. Instead of playing victim to her sexuality, the modern woman (who is liberated from her fear of sex) is the one best equipped to destroy the monster.

3) *Dracula* represents invasion. In a recent dissertation, associate professor Gensea Carter offers the theory that the original *Dracula* was a powerful foreshadowing of the real-life horrors of World War I.

Carter sees the novel's depiction of a siege of vampirism descending on England as a glimpse of the mechanized warfare that would soon kill an entire generation of Englishmen. Stoker's outrageous scenario -- that a monstrous foreign entity (from the Austro-Hungarian Empire) invades innocent England using unforeseen, forbidden tactics to slaughter her citizens -- came horrifyingly true less than two decades later. Count Dracula's speech, dress and mannerisms were all really weird and really "foreign."

"Questions of invasion, identity, and war were entangled in a dramatic story about vampires feeding on women and children in London," writes Carter. She proves her thesis with a close examination of Stoker's research. Magazines of the times were using pretty monstrous rhetoric to express fears about Germany's aggression. Stoker, she suggests, simply capitalized on these anxieties -- and that is why English readers found the story so frightening. When Dracula asks, "What devil or what witch was ever so great as Attila, whose blood is in these veins?" Carter sees him as a clear expression of Germany's thirst for global domination.

4) The vampire character is a way to explain people and situations that did not comply with social expectations. This is the thesis of Jennifer Fountain's recent dissertation, *The Vampire in Modern American Media*. "In Romania," she writes, "women who resisted performing traditional duties -- caring for the family, tending crops -- were thought to be vampires. Likewise, vampires were also blamed for the spread of the plague throughout Europe. When greeted with disturbing, unexplainable phenomena, it was easier to blame events on vampires than to live with the unknown." Under this theory, the teen vampires of *Twilight* might represent drug addicts -- members of society we cannot really figure out or accept.

READING #3 CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT LITERATURE

Zombies

WHY ARE THEY SO POPULAR?



The lively zombies of “I am Legend” (2007) are never clearly visible.

The zombie is one of our most enduring monsters. Why do we keep telling stories about dead people who come back to life? We see a wide range of them, from the super-slow and easily-killed (*Night of the Living Dead*) to the fast-moving and super-powerful (*I Am Legend*, the 2007 version). What is the deal with zombies? Here are four thoughts on the answer to that:

1) **Zombies are a warning to us: stop living mindless lives of consumerism!** They are so scary because they represent an exaggerated mirror image of us – a fear of what we ourselves are becoming. Zombies remind us that most of the time, we’re just mindless drones, plugged into our earphones, eating prepared foods, shambing on treadmills that go nowhere, shopping for clothes to go shopping in, etc.

“Zombie movies force us to figure out what, if anything, differentiates us from the monsters on the screen,” writes Douglas Rushkoff in a recent *Discover* magazine article, “What You Can Learn from Zombie Movies: Lessons on science, consumerism, and the

soul.” Zombies force us to confront ourselves. “What is life? Why does it depend on killing and consuming other life? Does this cruel reality of survival have any intrinsic meaning?

2) **Fear of infection: zombie-ism is AIDS in disguise.** The original concept of corpses coming back to life sprang from accounts of poisoning in the Caribbean. Poisons derived from certain frogs could induce a corpse-life state, and buried Haitians woke up and came “back to life” in several cases. In other cases, “the individuals who had been branded zombies by terrified peasants turned out to be victims of epilepsy, mental retardation, insanity or alcoholism,” according to Bernard Diederich in his *Time* magazine article, “Do Zombies Really Exist?” The medical records of rural doctors show plants and toads that produce “hallucinogens, powerful anesthetics and chemicals that affect the heart and nervous system,” writes Diederich, and fish that contain a deadly nerve poison, *tetrodotxin*.

Diseases can do these same things to us, and the modern plague is AIDS. It can turn perfectly healthy people into zombie-like creatures in a matter of months. While we may be able to cope with this in our conscious minds, our subconscious is going nuts! Zombie movies are our subconscious nightmares of infection jumping onto the big screen.

3) **Zombies represent our collective guilt over all the dead people we could not save.** Those 55 people killed in a bombing in the Middle East you heard about on the radio this morning, the thousands of refugees starving due to that African rebellion, the schoolchildren lost in that Chinese earthquake or the typhoon in Indonesia – we do not forget these images. This theory holds that we actually record these reports of terrorism, famine, disease, and warfare, all the innocent people whose deaths we see on television – we just push them down into our subconscious. We carry around a dim memory of all those faces beyond our reach. In the “night of the living dead,” they come back for us. We are revisited by the forgotten.

4) **Zombies represent the erasure of “borders.”** Civilization depends on clear boundaries – between nations, between home and school, good and bad, between the

living and the dead. This concept emphasizes our fear that we have lost control of modern life – planes are crashing into buildings, the family unit is falling apart, our jobs are moving overseas, our friends' disembodied faces appear on our computer screens, babies can be manufactured in test tubes. Where are the borders, people?

The zombies therefore represent our worst fear – that the line between the living and the dead is now erased. All borders are meaningless. All rules are gone. Zombies stand at the gates of lawlessness.