

“Against life as we know it”: Working with Werewolves to Create Disability Counterstories

by Claudia Chiang-Frost

Werewolves can be seen as ableist portrayals of disability, as their monstrosity/disability is a punishment, something to fear, or fix. I, a multiply disabled person, have always been fascinated by monsters and the ways I see myself represented in their stories. Like werewolves, I suffer from a painful condition that requires accommodation, can lead to isolation, and ultimately feels out of my control. As I started my senior year of college, I began to experience mysterious symptoms. I would wake up with swollen stiff hands and painful shoulder blades and elbows. I’d find clumps of hair on my pillow and rashes over my body and found myself exhausted even after a full night’s sleep. When I tried to talk to family members or doctors about it, everyone said “that sounds normal” or “it’s probably because you work so much.” I started upsetting people, as my exhaustion meant I started to miss things—work, assignments, volunteering, hangouts. My mind felt slower, and my breath was short. I felt besieged by something. I didn’t know what to say, I didn’t know what was wrong. My symptoms reached their peak during a study-abroad experience in Cuba, a time when I slept most of the day, and the rashes in my arms and legs became larger, bloodier, so alarming that others would ask if I’d been bitten by something. I felt monstrous and tried to hide the rashes as best I could. When I returned home, I went to yet another doctor, and this one, at last, said that what I was experiencing was not normal. It took another year of referrals and tests and waiting for a diagnosis to receive it: I had systemic lupus erythematosus, an autoimmune disorder. The word *lupus*, meaning wolf, was used to describe the rashes victims experience, which look like wolf bites (Chabner 2013). Lupus, and my last name Lopez (now dropped), came from the same root word. Wolves were a part of me.

I’ve spent the years since grappling with this disease. There are times I am in remission and can pretend I don’t have a disability. Then comes a flare-up, when my symptoms suddenly return, sometimes for seemingly no reason. During those times, being disabled can mean isolation, shame, mostly frustration. My family is too scared to learn anything about it—sometimes I wish I also didn’t know about what lupus can do to my body. Friends offer cures they promise will fix it (turmeric, cinnamon, yoga, crabgrass tea, this diet, but no, this diet is better). But it will *not be fixed*. I must live with these transformations. But I’ve found comfort in the unexpected—monster stories. Werewolves in particular spoke to me: the violent transformations that happened *to them*, their isolation, the bruises and scrapes that seemed to remain even once in “human” form, the frustration with being incurable. I started to think about their stories through a disability studies (DS) lens as I began to write and research about the ways disability can look like in higher education.

In the lesson plan suggested for college students that follows, I present various werewolf stories, reveal the ableism within them, and present a prompt to elicit a counterstory. Through rewriting these stories, students examine the ways ableist narratives of werewolves create a normative and right body/behavior and a “deviant” one (Garland-Thomson 1997, 8). In my classroom as a Gender

Studies instructor, I find that using counterstories encourages students to imagine a better world—here I apply them so we can imagine better worlds for monsters while also offering ways to disrupt, challenge, and oppose ableism.

Disability and Monstrosity

The link between disability and monstrosity is long-standing. In the medical field, not only are many illnesses named after monsters but also the “scientific study of birth defects and developmental disorders is known as teratology, or literally, the study of monsters” (McMahon-Coleman 2016b, 194). This link exists in entertainment, too. For example, the sideshow/freak shows of the 1800s would meld these ideas, hiring people like Julia Pastrana, who had some form of hypertrichosis, which causes hair to grow in unexpected places and to longer lengths than usual, and was called the “bear woman” and “hybrid woman” (Garland-Thomson 2003). This is because, like monsters, disabled people are ascribed “freakdom” status (Garland-Thomson 2012, 344), setting them apart from the able-bodied, the normative, the non-monstrous body. Cohen (1996) argues that monsters signify something “other than itself”: The monster incorporates “fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy” (4). Biklen and Bogdan (1977, cited in Rubin and Strauss-Watson 1987) identified ten common literary portrayals of disabled people: pitiable, victims, sinister, props, a “super-crip,” burdens, asexual, a joke, incompetent, and isolated. These tropes appear in monster stories, as monsters are often victims, sinister, or isolated. Since the 1980s, the field of folklore has explored the topic of disability, “usually to identify and explore the stigmas associated with disabilities,” however, the field often does not engage with DS scholarship, which would examine the social, cultural, and political aspects of disability (Prahla 2024, 269). Here, I use DS and Folklore Studies to examine how monsters show our fear of the disabled body and mind and the ways we try to control them.

Werewolf Stories: Reading Contemporary Narratives

Harry Potter

In the Harry Potter universe, a fictional world populated by humans, wizards, elves, and other supernatural creatures, werewolves are seen as evil, and Remus Lupin, bitten by a werewolf as a child, is the sole exception (Rowling 1999). Lupin transforms during full moons, a total body and mind transformation taking place. In this universe, werewolves are not hunted, but they are ostracized into werewolf-only communities and are unable to work among wizards. This gives rise to angry communities and extremists, including the one who bit Lupin as a form of revenge on Lupin’s family of wizards. Like disabled people, Lupin is unable to access schooling until he has accommodations (a private and safe space to turn into a werewolf; days off around the full moon, as well as a potion to control his monstrosity). His condition is kept secret from all but the school’s headmaster as people’s reaction to his condition is to ostracize him: “When they know of my affliction, they can barely talk to me!” Lupin says about those who discover he is a werewolf (Rowling 2003, 175).

As an adult, he again finds that his accommodation needs leave him unable to attain employment. He is fearful and ashamed of his condition and avoids romantic relationships and parenthood. He is briefly employed as a professor by his old schoolmaster, yet he is ultimately forced to resign after the students’ parents discover his werewolf status. Rowling has spoken

about how this portrayal is a metaphor for *people's reactions to illness and disability* (Fraser 2002), and scholars have connected it to HIV/AIDS (Bérubé 2016; Napolitano 2016). It is always the monster who must change, not their community that has ostracized them (Leduc 2020). This, Leduc (2020) argues, is similar to the medical model of disability: pushing for surgeries and medicines to erase disabilities, rather than providing access or acceptance to the disabled, to monsters. This model also seeks to prevent the “disease” from being passed down.

Despite his difficulties, Lupin tries to find worthiness in his monstrousness by using his supernatural strength for good, as he becomes a soldier against the forces of darkness attacking the wizarding world. During one battle, he is killed. His willingness to sacrifice for others and his shame around his condition make him different from the other werewolves of the Harry Potter universe and grant him acceptance among the heroes of the story, those fighting against dark forces (Rowling 2003). Lupin, then, fits the pitiable victim stereotype of disabled people that Biklen and Bogdan (1977, cited in Rubin and Strauss-Watson 1987) suggest; he is a “good” disabled person/werewolf, unlike those who are angry about their exclusion. Still, could the school have fought to retain him? Would challenging and pushing parents past their fear of werewolves have done more for the future acceptance of other children who could have been born or turned into werewolves?

Supernatural and Ginger Snaps

The popular CW television series *Supernatural* focuses on two brothers, Sam and Dean, who hunt supernatural creatures across the United States. The episodes largely take a monster-of-the-week approach, and in one episode, a woman, Madison, discovers she is a werewolf (Gamble 2007). Madison initially does not realize she was bitten and has been transforming, including a transformation during which she ate her ex-boyfriend.¹ The brothers are the ones to deliver the news as Madison herself does not know about the existence of werewolves. Madison's struggle to realize she is a werewolf feels reminiscent of the struggle for diagnosis many disabled people experience, and her difficulty accepting she is a werewolf resembles the difficulty of accepting an incurable illness diagnosis. Madison is unable to accept the risk that she might hurt someone, and so she asks the brothers to kill her.

Note to Educators: This narrative includes references to suicide and suicide ideation. Ensure you and your students know how to find support and mental health resources.

The show comes back to this theme in a later season, when Claire, a teenage girl being raised by monster hunters, is bitten by a werewolf and the hunters are on a race to find a cure before her condition becomes permanent (Yockey, Perez, and Glynn 2017). Dean suggests different ways the condition could be managed if they do not find a cure, but Claire feels she would be too dangerous for her loved ones to be around. Claire's anxiety regarding her potential future is reminiscent of the disabled experience, as the DS scholar Garland-Thomson (2012) argues that “people with disabilities ... do not have predictable narratives of their future” (351). She has not met a werewolf who is allowed to live, so she cannot imagine a life in which her transformations are managed safely. Perhaps she could sense that others were uncomfortable co-existing with something difficult—like disability, with making space for it, and so it is

deemed too much, or too risky. Within the Supernatural universe, Madison's and Claire's choices mark them as "good" and selfless. This contrasts with other werewolves like Ginger, from the film *Ginger Snaps*, who relish in their condition (Fawcett 2000).

Ginger is a teenage girl and outcast at her high school, as is her sister Bridget. Ginger and Bridget are friendless, frequently bullied, and seem disconnected from their parents. But the girls are extremely close to each other and are enamored with ideas of violence and death, creating tableaux portraying ways that one or both sisters could die in a horrific accident. Their connection, however, is suddenly interrupted as Ginger seems to begin her menstruation one day. Her sudden hairiness, hunger, sexuality, and strength scare Bridget, but Ginger seems intrigued by it, even as she discovers she is slowly turning into a werewolf. Ginger attacks those who have bullied or hurt her, empowered by her condition, and is ultimately marked as too wild, too angry, too sexual, and is killed when she refuses a cure. She, like many disabled people, does not want to be cured, instead, she wants to maintain her autonomy as a werewolf and to figure out what her life could look like.

Supernatural, in another season, features a different way Ginger's story could have played out. The brothers encounter an old friend, a hunter named Garth, who has become a werewolf (Glass 2014). Initially he is embarrassed by his condition, and keeps it secret from the brothers, but he is eventually found out living with a pack. Garth's life is spared, as he convinces the brothers that thanks to the community he is now a part of, he's learned to navigate his condition and control his hunger so he can choose not to eat humans. Could Madison and Ginger have come to the same place of peacefulness and control over their condition with time and in community? Perhaps as they reconciled their identities as being women *and* wolves, embodying ableness and disability at different times, they would become more comfortable navigating their lupine status. Being in community with those who share their condition or disability status is often vital to the well-being of disabled people; there they receive empathy, care, and support (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). If Ginger and Madison had been allowed to live as werewolves, the *Ginger Snaps* and *Supernatural* universes could have learned a way for them and others to navigate lycanthropy, a model for imagining new ways of living for able-bodied people and disabled people, as disabled people demonstrate that there are alternative ways to live and engage with the world (Garland-Thomson 2012) given that they have to be creative to live in a hostile world. Other werewolf encounters, then, could have come to happy endings. Instead, death is most often what the characters are willing to consider or can imagine.

Monster Studies in the Classroom

Ableist narratives create the "acceptable" and "right" body/behavior, and the "wrong one" (Garland-Thomson 1997). Disabled people and monsters are portrayed as "something" wrong, an example of what we must not be, and, if we are, these stories serve as a warning (Leduc 2020; Quayson 2007). Impulsivity and sexual desires, for example, are exhibited by the "wrong" bodies of werewolves. In literacy education there's the idea of stories acting as windows into other lives or mirrors reflecting our own experiences (Sims Bishop 1990). Students who might relate to the behaviors, illnesses, and desires of these monsters are instead offered distorted mirrors.

Educators in a literature, writing, or media classroom, then, can present werewolf and other monster's stories using critical literacy strategies to challenge ableist narratives. By equipping students to interrogate texts, question social structures, analyze the stereotypes they are exposed to, and discuss the impact of them (Scharrer and Ramasubramanian 2015), students can develop their "sociopolitical consciousness and exercise productive agency toward transforming hegemonic structures and systems" by telling their own counterstories (Young et al. 2021, 503; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Through storytelling, disabled and able-bodied students can learn to apply critical literacy to examine the dominant narratives that are commonly accepted.

Through this lesson plan, students will think about a) perspective in narratives, b) normative and deviant cultural traits as established through narrative text, c) character traits, and finally, d) their knowledge and perspectives relative to those items, which allows for students to ponder the connection between monster portrayals and disability and to challenge the ableist narratives that may be embedded in many monster stories. The first step is done by helping students practice creating counterstories. Young et al. explore the concept of Counter Fairy Tales as a way for Black girls to tell their stories, as these counternarratives "expose, challenge and disrupt antiblackness in English education" (2021, 501). These counter fairy tales can challenge who we think of as the monster, the punishments presented as acceptable, or even the characters' aspirations that lead them to make their choices. For example, they can be asked, "What would this fairy tale or monster story look like in your neighborhood? What goals would the monster have?" Kim and Cho (2017), meanwhile, recommend a critical literacy strategy in which children re-tell a fairy tale from the perspective of a different character, like telling the three little pigs story from the perspective of the hungry wolf. Like these, counterstories focusing on monsters could be a powerful tool for students to challenge ableist narratives with their authentic stories and empathetic counter-narratives. Below, I share a lesson plan inspired by Garland-Thomson's (2012) call to preserve disability rather than erase it or fix it and Bell and Robert's model to "construct alternative stories geared toward social justice" (2010, 2295). Ultimately, counterstories can help students become "active producers of knowledge about the social, political, and phenomenological understanding of disability" (Mitchell and Snyder 2005, 633), as students "re-write and re-read" narratives to challenge dominant and often harmful messages (Young et al. 2021, 504).

Monster stories are ubiquitous, unlike stories of disabled people, who are often rendered invisible. Through reframing monster stories as ones of disability, we expose the dominant narratives of disability and reveal the harm of stories that seek to "to cure, fix, repair or deny" monstrosity/disability (Mitchell and Snyder 2005, 630). We should not seek to build a world without monsters or disabled people. Instead, we can let the monstrous/disabled body help us "probe the contours and boundaries of what we take to be human" (Garland-Thomson 1996, 1). Through these encounters and new understandings, we can become "more open to the surprise of other selves and bodies and more willing and able" to engage with care and even enchantment (Bennet 2001, 131).

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Sample Lesson Plan

GRADES College

SUBJECT AREAS Literature, Creative Writing, and Media Studies

MATERIALS Internet access, paper, pen, markers, Post-its

TIME Two 60-minute class sessions

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify dominant narratives in monster stories and the ableism within them.
- Create counterstories.

PRE-CLASS STUDENT WORK Students should read and create notes about this article (excluding the lesson plan).

FACILITATION NOTES This activity will work best if students have been introduced to the concept of the different models of disability. A good reading on the topic is the disabled cartoonist and writer Dave Lupton's 2021 article "A basic interpretation of the models of Disability" available on [Disability Arts Online](#), which was written to be used "as a resource for those people with little or no understanding of the various models of disability" (24).

RECOMMENDED MEDIA

- "Against life as we know it": Working with Werewolves to Create Disability Counterstories" - essay portion
- If time allows, the class could watch *Ginger Snaps* or the *Supernatural* episode "Heart" Season 2, episode 17

CLASS SESSION 1

WARM-UP (3 minutes)

- Have students approach the whiteboard and create a list of monsters. You can have them initially brainstorm on their own and then add to the whiteboard.
- Students might ask about the type of monsters they can list. Does a sexy vampire count? Does a bunny vampire like Bunnacula count? What about monsters they were told about in childhood? I encourage you to say yes, so they are thinking broadly about the title of "monster."
- A virtual classroom or a large lecture could do this activity using word cloud software or a shared slide students can type in.

REVIEW (10 minutes)

Ask students what stood out to them from the reading. Review the ten common portrayals of disabled people in literature in particular. Ask if they see any of these in the monster examples they listed previously. For example, Freddy Krueger from the *Nightmare on Elm Street* film

franchise is a supernatural “monster,” and his visible disability in the form of burn scars is used to scare audiences. Frankenstein’s monster is a villain *and* pitiable in his monstrosity/disability.

LECTURE (10 minutes)

Guide students through the definitions of dominant narratives and counternarratives, discussing the ableism inherent in dominant narratives.

Keywords

Dominant Narratives	Counternarratives
Mainstream	Resisting, critiquing, exposing biases and misconceptions in the dominant narratives

Ask students:

- Why do these dominant narratives have power?
- Whom do these narratives benefit?
- Why do counternarratives matter?
- What are some ways their own cultural groups engage with different monsters? Are there any specific to their community?

Students can discuss in pairs or do independent writing. Then have students share their thoughts in a full class discussion.

GROUP WORK (10 minutes)

Hand out materials so that students can write in groups. This can be space on the whiteboard or easel pads. Have students draw a large Venn diagram in the middle. Breakout groups in a virtual class could make a copy of a slide you prepared with a Venn diagram.

Prompt: What is different about monsters we’re supposed to like and monsters we are scared of? Some answers might include: the characters explore a journey of redemption, they are sexy, protectors, pitiful, have a soul, punish others, are tragic figures, are unruly, powerful.

DISCUSSION (15 minutes)

Have students share their answers.

Ask: What dominant narratives and counternarratives do you see in your examples?

Students might see, for example, that disfigured characters are more likely to be seen as “evil,” like Scar from *The Lion King*. Maybe they see that more likeable characters tend to be ones with more remorse.

EXIT ACTIVITY (2 minutes)

Have students write responses to these prompts:

- Write down two takeaways from today.
- What questions do you have, or what do you think was missing from our discussion that we could discuss?

CLASS SESSION 2

WARM-UP (2 minutes)

Ask students to think about a counterstory they are familiar with (from family or cultural stories, films, tv, or literature).

REVIEW (10 minutes)

Address student takeaways, questions, and/or suggestions for further conversation.

WRITING ACTIVITY (20 minutes)

Ask students to think about a dominant “monster” narrative. It can be one that was addressed during the last class period, but it does not have to be. Can they think of ways to counter the ableist narratives within? Examples:

- What would the Little Mermaid’s story look like if her muteness and tail weren’t things that needed to be fixed?
- What if La Llorona’s emotions weren’t feared but instead listened to?
- What would Madison’s story from *Supernatural* be like if she had been able to be in community with other werewolves who did not eat people, instead of being isolated?

Have students write this story in the form of poetry, a mini-play, comic panels, or traditional story. *(This can be done in groups and/or individually as well as being used as the entire activity or as a pre-write/rough draft.)*

SHARING ACTIVITY (20 minutes)

If this was a group activity, students should choose one speaker for their team. The rest of the group should move to another group, to hear that group’s speaker. They should be able to hear a few groups this way.

- If this was a solo/paired activity, students should get in small groups to share their stories.
- If this was a take-home activity, you should reserve another class session for sharing, perhaps in groups of three.

CLOSING DISCUSSION (5 minutes)

Ask: What was your favorite counternarrative you heard from your classmates today?

EXIT NOTE (3 minutes)

Have students respond to these prompts:

- What was something that surprised you?
- What connections can you make to your real-life experiences?
- Write down two takeaways from today.
- What questions do you have?
- What do you think was missing from our discussion?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

Other activities include having students talk about how they feel as they challenge their own ideas of disability through these activities and what dreams they have as/for disabled and able-bodied people. *These dreams too can be a form of resistance against dominant messages.*

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Endnotes

¹This seems to echo disabilities affecting memory and impulsivity, and werewolves are often used as allegories for addiction and mental illness, as in Martin Millar's Wolf Girl young adult novels (McMahon-Coleman 2016a).

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