

Classroom Connections

The following full assignment instructions are geared toward honors-level college undergraduates but may serve as jumping-off points for other educators.

NEW MONSTER PROJECT

Possible Learning Goals

- Analyze monsters as reflections of cultural anxieties.
- Apply theoretical concepts to original creative work.
- Explore how media and folklore shape public fears.
- Practice collaborative storytelling and presentation skills.
- Demonstrate mastery of a specific artistic technique or genre convention through original monster creation.

Notes and Adaptations: The Representation section can be adapted to different educational levels, disciplines, or historical/cultural contexts. The Application of Theory section may be revised to emphasize concepts in other fields or removed entirely for less theory-focused settings. The Monster Art and Artifacts component can also be tailored to specific media, e.g., photography classes might emphasize staged or digitally manipulated photographs, journalism classes might require investigative articles, science classes might focus on fictionalized scientific evidence, etc. The Presentation requirement may be adapted or waived; other presentation modes might include gallery-style art displays, short films, magazine layouts, and so forth.

Original Assignment Prompt

In small groups, design an entirely original monster that reflects what you feel is a significant concern or anxiety in our present world.

Representation: Describe your monster's appearance, abilities, name(s), and the cultural or societal fears it represents. Try to connect your monster to contemporary anxieties, tensions, prejudices, or social changes rather than relying on broad or timeless fears. If you can, draw upon your own fields of study. A monster informed by concepts in math, exercise science, music, etc. will stand out in an interesting and original way. You may also wish to consider your specific generational and/or cultural experiences as you create your monster.

Application of Theory: Integrate several of the “Seven Theses of Monster Culture” into your monster’s design and story. For example, your monster might embody a marginalized group, punish transgressive behavior, collapse categories we take for granted, represent hidden cultural desires, or guard social boundaries. You are also encouraged to incorporate other relevant psychological, philosophical, or sociological concepts discussed in class.

Monster Art and Artifacts: Creatively situate your monster within the world by developing evidence of its existence and interaction with society. Unless your monster is invisible, you should illustrate it in some way, without using generative AI, for your presentation. If it is invisible, provide other evidence of its existence. In addition, describe and, if you wish, create artifacts related to your monster's existence. Possible artifacts include:

- inscriptions and/or runes
- masks and/or statues
- talismans
- ballads and/or nursery rhymes
- investigative reports
- witness statements
- media coverage
- scientific documents
- environmental evidence
- audio recordings
- legal records.

Class Presentation: In 15-20 minutes, present your new monster to the class. Instead of relying on a traditional informational slideshow, consider presenting your monster in a more immersive or performative manner. Perhaps your team is a group of monster-hunters describing the monster it's about to investigate for a podcast or documentary. Perhaps your team is a group of scientists or government officials briefing us about this new threat. Perhaps your team consists of cultists who worship this new monster and are evangelizing to us. Perhaps you're a group of college students heading into the big city and talking about the monster that haunts the neighborhood or structure you're about to visit. You may still include a slideshow to convey key information, but feel free to use it within a more creative context.

SELF AS MONSTER

Possible Learning Goals

- Reflect on identity and social labeling.
- Explore metaphor and symbolic self-representation.
- Apply theoretical concepts to lived experience.
- Practice creative expression alongside critical analysis.
- Apply techniques of exaggeration, symbolism, stylization, or metaphor to transform aspects of the self into a creative monstrous form.

Notes and Adaptations: Because this assignment invites personal reflection and vulnerability, instructors should clearly communicate that students may approach the assignment metaphorically, autobiographically, humorously, or entirely fictionally. The Creative: Visual segment and the Reflective Essay, without the theoretical component, are the most adaptable to various educational levels and purposes. The visual option is the most AI-proof creative choice if that is a concern. Although this reflective essay is geared to show off mastery of class-specific concepts and theory, it could be adapted to show awareness of historical or cultural traditions, psychological concepts, or simply left as a personal explanation of the student's creative work. Instructors wishing to use it as a knowledge test might require it to be written in class. Turning the reflective essay into a public presentation should be done with caution, as this assignment asks students to make themselves vulnerable, but it might be appropriate in some contexts.

Original Assignment Prompt

We are all monsters—sometimes in others' eyes, sometimes in our own, sometimes in certain situations, sometimes in certain places. But being a monster isn't all bad. Monsters are powerful. Monsters can protect and avenge. Monsters hold out the possibility of transgression, freedom, and change.

Working individually, represent yourself as a monster, either something archetypal or completely new. For example, your monstrous self might make visible some secret or repressed aspect of your identity; a stigmatized identity you have been unwillingly assigned by others; an identity, belief, or behavior you willingly hold that others perceive as threatening, transgressive, or difficult to understand; a deep fear or anxiety you harbor; and so forth. Unless otherwise specified by the instructor, generative AI should not be used to produce the creative or written components of this assignment. This assignment has two parts.

PART ONE. Creative [Choose One]

1. **Visual:** You may choose to **draw, paint, photograph, sculpt, or video yourself as the monster.** Transform or stylize your self-representation in ways that emphasize metaphor, symbolism, exaggeration, or emotional truth rather than simply reproducing your everyday appearance. Thus, if you take photos or a video of yourself, you will need makeup and/or costuming, and/or apply digital manipulation. If you're drawing or taking photos of yourself, turn in at least four images of your monster-self in different moods or poses. If you are painting or sculpting yourself, you may turn in one to two paintings or sculptures, depending on the medium and level of detail used (discuss with your professor). If you are creating video, your video(s) must equal at least four minutes of content, primarily featuring you as a monster. Works in physical media must be physically turned in; digital media can be uploaded. You may turn in more than the minimum required.
2. **Written:** You may choose to **write a personal narrative from your monstrous-self's perspective and in your monster-self's "voice."** This essay should be significantly different from the final reflective essay; for example, this narrative

might be an autobiographical anecdote about a significant event or difficult choice that contributed to the development of your monster-self, a description of your monster's first appearance, an essay about your monster-self's dreams and goals or deepest fears, or an argument between your real self and your monster self. Be creative and make sure your "monster voice" is distinct from your "scholar voice." Your essay should be 1,000 to 2,000 words long.

PART TWO. Reflective Essay

In addition to the creative part of the assignment, you must write—using your "scholar voice"!—a separate short reflective essay (around 1,000-1,500 words) about your monstrous self. Demonstrate your understanding of key concepts in monster theory and your ability to apply those concepts to your "monstrous self," whether that monster involves anxieties and fears, beliefs and behaviors, or assigned sociocultural identities.

Your essay should thoughtfully address questions such as: What makes me monstrous? Is my monstrous identity known to others or secret? Is it something others have bestowed upon me or something I've bestowed upon myself? Is my monstrosity a stigma or a strength? Do I want to deny/overcome this aspect of myself or accept/embrace it, and why? What does my monstrosity mean within the context of my community or culture—what function does it serve?

As you write, draw on and apply concepts from class to add depth and context to your reflections. Please cite relevant sources as appropriate and add a reference list at the end; references will not be included in the essay's word count. Choose and consistently apply a formal citation/reference style such as MLA, APA, or Chicago.

Writing this essay might bring up strong emotions, so give yourself time. Although your essay should be academic in nature, your emotional responses are an important part of the reflective process. If the assignment resonates with you personally, consider responding in ways that feel constructive and supportive, whether through conversation, creative expression, community engagement, reflection, or professional support.