



We Are All Monsters Here: Teaching Monstrification by Making and Becoming Monsters

by Dru Pagliassotti

This essay introduces an undergraduate honors course that approaches monsters as products of monstrification, a discursive act of interpellation. Students move from analyzing to creating and inhabiting monsters, and the monsters they produce reveal concerns about identity, embodiment, and technological encroachment that echo themes from internet folklore and creepypasta traditions. By examining monsters as constructs of participatory meaning-making activities, students grasp that monstrification can affect themselves as well as others.

Monsters, whether drawn from traditional myths and legends or more contemporary digitally mediated cultural narratives, function as “meaning-making machines” (Halberstam 1995, 21). As is often noted in the field of monster studies (e.g., Beal 2022, 1; Scott 2007, 1; Weinstock 2020, 2), monsters (monstrum) have historically served as signs intended to show or reveal (monstrare), or remind, admonish, advise, warn, or teach (monere) anyone capable of correctly interpreting

Figure 1. Digital collage for Self as Monster assignment, by S. Stahoski. Reproduced with permission.

them. In other words, “[m]onsters are, at their base nature, by their essential ontology, pedagogic tools” (Mittman 2017, 19) or, more simply, “[t]he monster’s body is a pedagogical body” (Cohen 2017, 228).

Note to Educators: Assignments that include student self-reflection alongside topics that may be triggering or traumatic require additional care and scaffolding in the classroom. Please ensure that you and your students know what resources are available as support if you include a personal monster-creation component to the assignment.

However, teaching monsters in the classroom poses ethical and pedagogical challenges. The language of monstrosity has, especially in Western culture, been used to justify exclusion, violence, and oppression by casting certain bodies, identities, and behaviors as less than human, even actively dangerous. Moreover, Western monster-theory narratives that treat monsters *only* as symbolic figures—as expressions of psychological anxieties, social fears, or evolutionary responses—may privilege analytical explanation over lived cultural understanding.

Douglas E. Cowan notes that approaches that merely “explain away” monsters risk not only dismissing the possibility of the monster itself but also the cultural and religious frameworks within which such beings are meaningful (2025, 25). Avoiding epistemological ethnocentrism might require regarding monsters as, ultimately, relational and rhetorical constructs—the products of a process of “monstrification.” That is, to label something or someone a “monster” is to perform an act of interpellation, a discursive maneuver that positions its subject within cultural systems of meaning and power: Monsters are spoken into existence. This perspective shifts the focus from “explaining away” monsters to examining how they are bestowed an identity as monsters. Analysis of the purposes and consequences of such monstrification may then follow.

This essay focuses on two assignments in the undergraduate honors course *We Are All Monsters Here* that approach monsters as the consequence of monstrification; it also discusses trends that have emerged in students’ monster-creation presentations that seem to situate their practices adjacent to the tradition of participatory storytelling, especially as practiced within the genre of internet horror.

In *We Are All Monsters Here*, students are asked to analyze monsters as cultural texts and engage with the processes by which monstrosity is assigned, resisted, and, sometimes, embraced. In doing so, they discursively transform shared anxieties into culturally recognizable narrative and symbolic forms. These assignments help students differentiate between two related actions: *interpellating* the monster, bringing it into being through various discursive practices, and *interpreting* the monster, explaining what it means within its cultural and historical context. Students move between these tasks throughout the semester, first analyzing examples of monstrification, then monstrifying contemporary social anxieties, and finally confronting the “monstrous self” by monstrifying themselves or reflecting on how they have been monstrified by others. It is, after all, a disquieting truth that we can be, and probably have been, interpellated as monsters by somebody else at one time or another. Understanding that monstrosity is not only something we impose on others, but that others may impose on us, helps students interrogate the ways in which social identities are constructed, contested, and transformed. Two texts anchor this progression: Cohen’s (1996) essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” provides the foundational analytical framework

to which students return throughout the semester, while Valente's (2010) poem "A Monstrous Manifesto" reminds students that identifying as a monster can help establish solidarity with others who have been marginalized and monstrified.

Class assignments were designed according to principles of student engagement (James and Brookfield 2014, Chap. 1) that emphasize personal relevance, multimodal learning, and unfamiliar or unexpected tasks. For instance, weekly assignments might ask students to photograph "uncanny" campus spaces or map a hypothetical zombie outbreak onto the campus and local community. These tasks encourage students to reinterpret the familiar environment in which they live through monstrous perspectives and situate themselves as both analytical outsiders and potentially threatened insiders.

In addition to engaging students with monster narratives and theory, the assignments also seek to familiarize them with processes of monstrification, gradually moving them from critique to creation to self-recognition. To avoid inadvertently promoting monstrification, *We Are All Monsters Here* focuses discussion on nonhuman monsters, although that may include monsters that appear human or were at one time human, such as zombies. Students are discouraged from describing regular humans as "monsters," a conversation that begins on the first day of class when, inevitably, someone answers the questions of "what's your favorite monster?" or "what monster scares you the most?" by referring to an ordinary human such as the fictional serial killer Dexter or the real serial killer Ed Gein. This begins what will become a semester-long discussion of monstrification. Although these ordinary humans might be described as *inhuman*, they are not *nonhuman*; their actions may be monstrous, but to describe them as a monster, students are reminded, is to exercise a rhetorical strategy often employed to encourage racist, religious, and political prejudice and excuse oppressive actions, laws, and policies.

To better illustrate the point, on the second day of class, students break into groups to view and discuss examples of human monstrification in the media: the 1800s media coverage of Jack the Ripper, which includes speculations about the Ripper's social class and background; contemporary political news coverage in which politicians label opponents as monsters; wartime propaganda depicting nations/religious groups as monsters; and political cartoons from the late 1800s and early 1900s that depict different racial/ethnic groups as monsters. These examples expose them to different ways in which monstrification has been used as a strategy of dehumanization and provides real-world context for some of the analyses they will read later in the semester. Because of the offensive nature of the imagery involved, however, instructors should clearly explain the purpose of the exercise beforehand and provide examples that avoid turning the activity into an experience of individual exposure or vulnerability for any students whose identities might be implicated by a monstrifying image.

Monster Creation

The Monster Creation project, assigned about halfway through the semester, marks a key pedagogical turning point in which students shift their focus from interpretation to interpellation. Working in small groups, students must design original monsters that embody some current, socially relevant anxiety, framing their work with Cohen's seven theses and other concepts drawn from monster theory. To encourage a creative approach and draw attention to the larger social context of monstrification, students are asked to present their monster within a fictive framework;

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for example, teams have chosen to be scientists at a national research conference, activists trying to protect a monster during a congressional hearing, podcasters investigating mysterious deaths, and a public relations team trying to rebrand a monster, among other scenarios. They must also create and present appropriate artifacts related to the monster, its creation, and/or its reception.

In a sense, this is a monstrous assignment. Monsters transgress, collapse, and challenge our ontological categories, as Cohen's third thesis asserts, and this assignment violates what are often taken to be natural boundaries between "play" and "scholarship," "truth" and "fiction." Presenting academic material in a playfully fictive format is an unfamiliar exercise to many students. However, allowing students freedom in how they create and present their monster makes the project personally meaningful, and adding a role-play component requires them to work in a variety of modalities. Team members are encouraged to apply skills and concepts from their majors and minors to the project, resulting in presentations that have included detailed descriptions of parasitic lifecycles or how alien prosthetic brain and spinal cord implants might work, debates over rebranding techniques for a malignant algorithmic monster, and lists of warning signs that may indicate monstrous infection. Student artifacts have included poetry, paintings, sculptures, sounds, newspaper articles, videos, and documents such as a congressional bill proposing a law to protect supernatural entities. About half the teams have chosen to present in costume. During the post-presentation question-and-answer period, the audience probes the mythology and assumptions behind the monster and soon begins asking questions that refer to the previous teams' monsters; this inspired in-character responses from both teams that unintentionally began weaving together a new monster mythos specific to each semester.

Although race, gender, and sexuality have been historically significant sites of monstrification, and remain subjects of controversy in public discourse, the overwhelming majority of monsters that students have created for this assignment focus on anxieties surrounding the self, such as loss of identity and cognitive control or bodily instability and malleability. This may indicate that students are internalizing the course's caution about the monstrification of marginalized groups, but it also suggests that students associate the task of co-creating a monster, its backstory, and its artifacts with their previous experiences, often in middle and high school, consuming participative internet folklore—particularly creepypasta's typically apolitical themes of anxiety and unstable subjectivity. Students' collaborative work creating a monster and its accompanying narrative for classroom consumption might be considered analogous to contemporary folklore production, with the teams drawing on the established techniques, traditions, and tropes of online horror, even though the dissemination of their newly created horror is primarily limited to the classroom and any websites or media accounts that they set up for their presentation.

Student-created monsters that point toward the loss of self and/or of the consciousness of self have usually taken the form of social media memes or viral algorithms, echoing contemporary concerns over the psychological effects of social media and too much "screen time" in general, as well as fears about the effects of generative AI on creativity and original thought. Students admitted that they struggle with their own social media habits or are concerned by the ways friends and family members have been affected by biased or incorrect online information. Their self-aware memes and algorithmic monsters encroaching on body and mind draw on familiar creepypasta territory inhabited by monsters such as [Smile Dog](#) or [Ben Drowned](#), collapsing what Cooley and Milligan describe as "the comfortable dichotomy of subjects acting upon objects by creating narrative

spaces in which haunted objects encroach upon the lives of their victimized subjects” (2018, 194). Along similar lines, new monsters representing anxieties about bodily permeability and transformation, often resulting from biotechnological experiments gone awry, point to body-horror themes of violation, mutation, or destabilization of the flesh as a site of identity (Halberstam 1995; Creed 2020, 216) and may share company with creepypasta monsters such as [Jeff the Killer](#) or the victims of [The Russian Sleep Experiment](#). Students have mentioned being inspired by contemporary anxieties around assigned versus self-identified sex and gender and the constellation of issues surrounding cultures of body-shaming and lookism.

Additionally, corporate manipulation and cover-ups have been central to many of the new monsters’ backstories. In addition to being common tropes in science fiction and horror, students noted that their choices reflected media coverage of corporate malfeasance and concerns over the unethical behaviors of some billionaire CEOs and their corporations. However, a majority of the students’ scenarios depicted small-scale investigators, such as podcasters, successfully uncovering unethical experimentation and confronting the corporate perpetrators of monstrosity. In three cases, the scenarios included scientific or corporate representatives inadvertently revealing themselves by the end of the presentation: taken over by the monsters they had created or exposed as a result of competitive in-fighting. These narratives may help assuage students’ sense of social powerlessness by allowing them to roleplay scenarios in which individuals call shady corporate behavior to account. Yet, while most presentations acknowledged Cohen’s second thesis—that the monster always escapes—by pointing out that the monsters or techniques leading to their creation haven’t been stopped, few directly engaged with the classic horror-genre question their scenarios seemed to pose: is the creation or the creator more dangerous? Nevertheless, by roleplaying scenarios that called corporate creators to account, students wrote themselves a victory over which it seems they considered to be the more dangerous of the two.

The Monstrous Self

The final class project, The Monstrous Self, returns students to the monstification of ordinary humans that was discussed at the beginning of class. By this time, however, they have been armed with a semester’s worth of reading, discussion, and reflection. Referring to Valente’s poem, “A Monstrous Manifesto,” and Cohen’s seventh thesis, “the monster stands at the threshold ... of becoming,” the assignment asks students to represent themselves as a monster that could, for example, represent some stigmatized or secret aspect of themselves or some deep fear or concern they harbor that arises to transform them. Students are invited to draw, paint, photograph, or record themselves as the monster, or write a personal essay or story narrated by their monstrous self. In addition to this creative work, they must write a short reflective essay that applies monster theory to explain why they chose to monstrify themselves in such a way.

Although the rest of the assignments are either posted openly in class discussion boards or presented in front of class, this assignment is individually completed and available only to the professor. Instructors adopting the assignment should review institutional policies regarding their federally or institutionally mandated reporting responsibilities should a student disclose certain types of information—including sexual harassment, sexual violence, or abusive conduct—in the context of the assignment and advise students, in class and in the assignment’s written instructions, about the types of content that could trigger a reporting requirement. It’s important that students

understand that any promise of confidentiality has limits so they can make an informed decision regarding what they want to share with their instructor.

In this assignment, students engage with processes of monstrification not solely as an interpreter or interpellator, but also as the *interpellated*. They are asked to inhabit the body of the monster and consider the lived experience of being monstrified. Their creative submissions have included sketches, digitally manipulated photographs, a sculpture, acrylic paintings, short stories, and monstrous dialogs. Two students gave permission to reproduce their “Self as Monster” images for this article as credited (Figures 1-3); their images represent manifestations of the personal anxieties or fears, or social expectations or stereotypes, that they felt made them “monstrous” in their own or others’ eyes. Their reflective essays remain confidential.



Figures 2 and 3. Sculpture for Self as Monster assignment, by C.A.T. Second image shows detail. Reproduced with permission.



Some students choose to engage with externally applied dehumanizing rhetoric by reflecting on ways in which they have been the subject of monstrification by others because of ethnic backgrounds, religious beliefs, sexual orientations, disabilities, medical conditions, or past actions.

Others take a more psychological perspective, monstifying themselves by exaggerating their inner drives, anxieties, or fears and depicting the ways in which this exaggeration might reveal itself in a monstrously embodied sense. Student work, which can range from painfully frank and vulnerable to somewhat distant and objective, requires them to examine themselves as both a subject called out by the rhetoric of monstification and an agent who may adopt, reshape, or resist that rhetoric. Many students sought to resist monstification, but some identified strengths in being a “monster,” including styling themselves as fierce defenders of others who share their backgrounds or as destructive monsters intent on shattering others’ prejudices and biases.

The monsters that students create and inhabit over the course of the semester reflect not only their individual anxieties but also their participation in evolving systems of storytelling—particularly those of internet horror, wherein processes of monstification shape the ways in which fear, identity, and power are understood and negotiated. Framing monsters as discursive constructs—products of an interpellative process of monstification—avoids dismissing the reality of monsters within cultural and religious belief systems while emphasizing that monstrosity emerges through acts of perception and description that are always entangled with power. In this way, *We Are All Monsters Here* strives to leave students prepared to recognize, navigate, and negotiate monstifying rhetoric, whether applied to others or to themselves, long after they leave the university.

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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.