

Monsters and the Moral Imagination

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In this article, Stephen T. Asma, a professor of philosophy at Columbia College Chicago, argues that monsters have a purpose — not merely to express our fears but also to test our sense

of morality. Although the likelihood of a real-life zombie attack seems negligible, other crises and traumas can and do occur. In fact, in our post-9/11 world, monsters have seen a sort of resurgence. Perhaps, as Asma argues, we create monsters as a reaction to the fears we experience and our inability to control the world around us. This article first appeared in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in October 2009.

Monsters are on the rise. People can't seem to get enough of vampires lately, and zombies have a new lease on life. This year and next we have the release of the usual horror films like *Saw VI* and *Halloween II*; the campy mayhem of *Zombieland*; more-pensive forays like *9* (produced by Tim Burton and Timur Bekmambetov), *The Wolfman*, and *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*; and, more playfully, *Where the Wild Things Are* (a Dave Eggers rewrite of the Maurice Sendak classic).

The reasons for this increased monster culture are hard to pin down. Maybe it's social anxiety in the post-9/11 decade, or the conflict in Iraq—some think there's an uptick in such fare during wartime. Perhaps it's the economic downturn. The monster proliferation can be explained, in part, by exploring the meaning of monsters. Popular culture is re-enchanted with meaningful monsters, and even the eggheads are stroking their chins—last month saw the seventh global conference on Monsters and the Monstrous at the University of Oxford.

The uses of monsters vary widely. In our liberal culture, we dramatize the rage of the monstrous creature and Frankenstein's is a good example—then scold ourselves and our “intolerant society” for alienating the outcast in the first place. The liberal lesson of monsters is one of tolerance: We must overcome our innate scapegoating, our xenophobic^o tendencies. Of course, this is by no means the only interpretation of monster stories. The medieval mind saw giants and mythical creatures as God's punishments for the sin of pride. For the Greeks and Romans, monsters were prodigies—warnings of impending calamity.

After Freud, monster stories were considered cathartic journeys into our unconscious; everybody contains a Mr. Hyde, and these stories give

xenophobic: relating to the fear of outsiders or foreigners.