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The Monster Within

Elijah Weiner

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In both Laird Hunt's *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* and Maria Dahvana Headley's translation of *Beowulf*, the protagonist actively seeks out the monster's home. While seemingly in search of shelter or renown, these glimpses into the monster's lives allows the similarities between them and the protagonists to shine through. As each tale progresses the distinction between the two becomes increasingly hard to define, causing us to question whether there truly are any heroes at all. Through subtle comparisons and violent encounters, each author makes clear that the real monster is ultimately the one inside of us.

The similarities between Hunt's *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* and Headley's translation of *Beowulf* are surprisingly numerous. Both stories begin with a character besieged in their own home, one from a terrifying creature and the other from traumas of the past. In both stories, the monsters are not so different from the heroes they battle, and in Hunt's novel they even seem to be one in the same. However, what remains most similar between them is the darkness that both the heroes and the villains contain. In Theodora Goss's essay "Listening to Krao: What the Freak and Monster Tell Us," Goss notes, "[w]e fear the monster, as we fear Frankenstein's creation, Dracula, or the Creature from the Black Lagoon, but we are also attracted to it.

That is because the monster allows us to escape from the categories that structure our understanding of the world. We are attracted not only to the monster, but also to what it represents: the chaos underlying meaning,” perhaps providing an explanation both to why we have always been enthralled by stories centered around monsters, as well as to why both Beowulf and the protagonist in *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* cannot stop themselves from venturing into the monster’s den (152).

Continuing her analysis of what it truly means to be monstrous, Goss claims that “the monster is a monster precisely because we cannot distance it from ourselves. It is not outside the natural order but both inside and outside, both other and us,” a sentiment expressed many times throughout *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* (149-150). While the protagonist’s transformation into the new Eliza in the house in the woods seems nothing short of a long expression of Goss’ statement, it is stated most clearly by the old Eliza as she discusses with Captain Jane her commitment to never return, “‘I won’t come back,’ I said. ‘Of course not, deary.’ ‘I won’t. Not like you. Not like the others.’ ‘Storm and still, knife and quill, we all say we won’t and then we almost all of us sooner or later will.’ She said this with a laugh as if it were a small and light thing to say after all those screams - the new Eliza’s, mine, hers, the others before - a trifle there in the morning sun” (Hunt 191). In this passage Hunt emphasises the similarities between the women’s journeys, and how regardless of their intentions to deviate from the path they almost always follow in the

footsteps of those that came before. While each of the different women in the tale appear monstrous at some point in the story (Granny someone's appetite for flesh, Captain Jane's brutal murder and her boat of corpses, Eliza's familial violence, etc.), it becomes impossible for any of the women to separate themselves from each other, as they are all a part of the same cycle.

In a quote seemingly written for the protagonist in *In the House in the Dark of the Woods*, Goss states “[w]e are drawn to the darkness that the monster represents, because that darkness is also freedom from the constraints of our ordinary lives (152). From the outset of the story, the protagonist's desire to escape from her monotonous lifestyle is clearly evident. She loathes spending all day cooped up inside her home, forced to do the cleaning and the cooking. We even learn that most visitors are sent away by her husband, regardless of her desire to meet them. This is why, even after the horrors she witnesses in the woods, when she asks, “what will happen to Eliza if I don't go back?” Captain Jane simply replies “[o]h, you'll go back” (Hunt 165). As Goss succinctly put, the freedom that the darkness provides is too alluring to resist, and despite the dangers she knows exists within the wood the protagonist does indeed go back. As mentioned earlier, the same can be said for each of the women in the woods, as all of them inevitably return despite their misgivings. Captain Jane is even certain that the old Eliza will return, regardless of her new lifestyle outside of the woods, because the allure of power will be too much to resist.

Another similarity between each of the women in *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* is the violence each of them inflicted in their own lives before they became a part of the woods (the protagonist commits matricide, Captain Jane poisons her brother, etc.). However, the protagonist's murder is not revealed until late in the novel, similarly alluding to the darkness hidden within each of us. Additionally, this inner turmoil can be seen as a struggle between two identities within a single person, as Christopher Clausen argues in his essay "From the Mountain to the Monsters." While discussing Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Clausen quotes "[a]ny man, he concludes, "is not truly one, but truly two," even perhaps multiple. "I saw that, of the two natures that contended in the field of my consciousness, even if I could rightly be said to be either, it was only because I was radically both (243). This is perhaps most apparent in the protagonist's love for her family, juxtaposed with her visions of burning their home to the ground and stabbing her husband to death. While these violent fantasies may seem appalling at first, I believe they serve as yet another reminder of how little separates us from the monsters we hate most, as the protagonist's aggression towards her husband can be directly linked to her mother's murder of her father.

While discussing the development of fictional monsters over time, Clausen notes "[i]ndeed the similarities between the scientists who are the protagonists of *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* two generations later suggest that once a fictional scientist had succeeded in creating a quasi-

human horror, the obvious progression was for a later researcher to transform himself into one,” which is perhaps an even stronger comparison to *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* (241). As mentioned previously, the protagonist’s transformation into the new Eliza can be seen as a transformation similar to that of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; from man to monster. However, as Clausen makes clear, Dr. Jekyll does not simply become something divorced from himself when he becomes the murderous Mr. Hyde, but rather allows the violent version of himself to take control. I believe that this is the case too in *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* in regard to all of the women, as the monstrous actions they perform do not simply manifest out of thin air; they were already a part of themselves. Captain Jane’s lust for power clearly existed before she became the woman of the woods, as evidenced by her willingness to murder her brother for his inheritance. Similarly, the protagonist’s willingness to aid Captain Jane in her dispatching of the blonde-haired man when she learns of his misdeeds is not unlike her murder of her mother once her father was slain. In both cases, each of these women simply allowed their more violent and vengeful traits to surface.

Clausen’s essay can be similarly applied to Headley’s translation of *Beowulf*, as the similarities between the tales and the messages they portray are many. In the age-old tale, the violent and bloodthirsty Grendel is unmatched in physical strength and brutality, seemingly unstoppable, until Beowulf arrives. Surprisingly, despite their oppositional status, Headley seems to make clear that Beowulf and Grendel are not

unlike one another. As Clausen notes when discussing Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, "Stapleton is the most formidable adversary Holmes ever faces, precisely because they are so much alike... One has the feeling that Holmes and Stapleton are equals who understand each other all along" (249). In this passage, Clausen is suggesting that the reason Sherlock Holmes has so much difficulty facing off against the villain in the story is because they are so similar. From their intellect to the "dry glitter" in their eyes, both villain and hero share exceptional physical and mental characteristics, seemingly differentiated only by their oppositional goals (249). This too can be said of Grendel and Beowulf, as right from the outset their strength is rivaled only by each other's. So too do their violent tendencies coincide, from Beowulf's dismembering of Grendel to his decision to use his own kinsman as bait. In both cases, both the hero and the villain are shown to be eerily similar, highlighting the evil hidden within even those we see as the best of us.

Goss' essay can also be applied to Headley's *Beowulf*, perhaps even more convincingly, as she even mentions the classic tale herself, stating "[t]he monster always means. Its body is a text that can be read, but how it is read depends on the reader. For Beowulf's medieval compositor, Grendel represented outer darkness, the chaos that exists outside the social order of Heorot. For John Gardner, he was the outsider who could perceive the underlying corruption of society" (153). Setting aside her reference to Gardner's *Grendel*,

Goss sees the original Grendel as a representation of “outer darkness, the chaos that exists outside the social order of Heorot,” leaving us to wonder what Beowulf represents. When the previous comparison between Grendel and Beowulf is taken into account, it stands to reason that Beowulf would represent something similar, but perhaps much more subtly. If Grendel represents outer darkness, then I believe that Beowulf represents an inner darkness, and the chaos that exists within Heorot Hall. Beowulf’s sinner darkness can be easily seen in his violent actions inside and out of Heorot Hall, but perhaps the chaos inside of Heorot that he represents can be seen most clearly in a speech made by Hrothgar’s wife, Wealtheow. Shortly after Beowulf dispatches Grendel, Hrothgar announces that Beowulf is now a son to him. Fearing for her family’s safety, Wealtheow quickly remarks:

Accept this cup from me, my lord of rings, and
lift this golden goblet... I hear you’ve chosen a
brand-new son, this Cain-cleansing warrior. I
know you know that life is short, that you are
mortal-the blessings you bask in today are boons
for bequeathing. I ask only that you gift
the kingdom

to your kin, before your sword is sheathed in
smoke. (Headley 52)

This passage highlights the danger in accepting Beowulf as an heir, as it is likely that he would kill off Hrothgar's sons in order to ensure his rise to power. This may have been avoided because of Wealtheow's quick thinking, but it is undoubtedly an example of chaos hidden within Heorot Hall.

As for Goss' description of Gardner's Grendel as the "outsider who could perceive the underlying corruption of society," this sentiment is quite easily found in *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* as well (153). While the protagonist initially sets out in search of berries and perhaps a reprieve from her tedious lifestyle, she is quickly made aware of the inadequacies her life possesses. When Eliza shows her the notebooks she reads and writes in, and encourages her to do the same, the protagonist soon realizes how oppressive her husband and her mother's rule against literacy truly was. Additionally, when the old Eliza returns home, she immediately takes charge of the household, removing the woman who had taken her place and ordering her husband around the house. While Hunt does not specifically address this, it seems likely that she too learned how oppressive societal views of the household really were and chose to rectify them in her own life.

When discussing the power of monsters, particularly in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, Goss states "[t]hey represent both what frightens us and what would transform us if we gave in to their allure. Dracula's bite turns Lucy into a monster, but it also frees her to express her repressed desires—to be the self she has always been, under her civilized veneer" (153). In this sense

Beowulf is not unlike Lucy, as his confrontation with a monster allows him too to shed his “civilized veneer.” As mentioned previously, his encounter with Grendel is extremely violent and portrays Beowulf as just as much of a monster as Grendel. Additionally, his decision to follow Grendel’s mother down into the mere to kill her is certainly not something a civilized man would do. It was more than revenge; it was seemingly something he had been waiting for his whole life. The encouragement he receives to do the deed from Hrothgar could also be seen as representative of the desire for violence within all of us, as even someone who cannot commit the deed wishes to be a part of it.

Another similar aspect between the two stories is the way that they end, or rather how they don’t end. At the conclusion of *Beowulf*, the hero of the story has far from saved his country; in fact, he seems to have doomed it. While attempting to slay yet another monster he dies in the process, leaving his people a horde of cursed treasure, and the countless enemies out for revenge are now left unchecked. Headley describes the situation adeptly in one of the last stanzas of the poem, stating:

Then another dirge rose, woven uninvited

by a Geatish woman, louder than the rest.

She tore her hair and screamed her horror

at the hell that was to come: more of the same.

Reaping, raping, feasts of blood, iron fortunes
marching across her country, claiming her body.

The sky sipped the smoke and smiled. (135)

As she makes clear, the cycle of violence that began the story is far from over, and it is unlikely to change. While the conclusion to *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* is slightly more optimistic, Hunt too highlights the continuing cycle of violence. The protagonist of the tale has now replaced the old Eliza in the house in the woods, showing her similar inability to change it. While her son sets out to find her, Hunt ends the novel with an image of flames, very similar to the smoke described in the quotation above, saying “[f]or as it rose, the good sun lit a line down the middle of the long field I found before me and seemed to set the air of the trees in the distance, and the whole wide world beyond them, to burn” (214).

In a similar vein, both Goss’ and Clausen’s essays too end in an almost identical fashion. Clausen concludes saying “[a]s Wordsworth had hinted eighty years earlier, the nightmare mountain, the apelike double, the undead bloodsucker, the implacable hound emerging out of the wall of fog - all the world’s horrors - slumber uneasily within us. Symbolic victories over such specters, to the nineteenth-century literary minds that dreamed them up so graphically, are likely to be temporary and partial at best” (250). As for Goss, she states “[m]onster needs to be used in a more specific sense, to identify what crosses the boundaries between self and other, stability and chaos...in which we

recognize that the division between self and other has always been arbitrary, and that the freak and monster are always ultimately about us” (Goss 15). In both cases, each author emphasizes what both Hunt and Headley seem to be arguing: that the monster is within. Clausen’s final words in particular seem to match up with the ongoing endings in both *Beowulf* and *In the House in the Dark of the Woods* previously discussed, as he highlights how any “symbolic victories” are “temporary and partial at best,” just as how any triumph over the monsters in both tales are equally fleeting. Goss’ final statement, however, seems to be more of a call to action, as she argues for recognizing that the monster has always been about us, and that there truly are no differences between those we see as freaks and ourselves.

In conclusion, despite the fantastical elements and larger than life characters present in both books, each of them serves as a message about ourselves. As both Goss and Clausen argue, since time immemorial monsters have served as a representation of what we find ourselves unable to confront; that which is within. When looked at closely, we find that Grendel is not so different from his murderer, and that all of the women in Hunt’s novel share much more than the names they inherit from one another. In both stories the authors highlight these similarities in order to emphasize the thin line that separates all of us, and how it takes very little to uncover what is hidden beneath. Ultimately all four authors, Headley, Hunt, Goss, and Clausen, conclude their works in an almost identical fashion: with the message that monsters have been, and always will be, about us.

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