Modern Monsters: Young American Selfhood

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Abstract
The bloody, murderous reputation of Frankenstein and Dracula haunted society for almost a century. “Monster” seemed to be indelibly synonymous with horror, sex, and crime, and these associations survived perpetual narrative revision since the conception of these terrifying nineteenth-century classics. But somewhere along the way, a paradigm shift occurred: contemporary monsters are no longer relegated to the gloomy corners of adult novels or horror films. Kids eat Franken Berry cereal for breakfast, watch Sesame Street and Monsters, Inc., and dress like sexified monsters at Universal's Halloween Horror Nights. After documenting the dark origin of Gothic monsters and the rise of a new monstrosity into America's cultural consciousness, this paper will thematically examine the contemporary function of monsters, focusing on the cultural assimilation of fear and identity through monster spin-offs in the realm of young people. While at first it seems this shift is arbitrary, this paper argues that monsters have been rehabilitated from nightmares about the horrifying “other” and appropriated as not-so-scary companions for a deliberate reason: to revise young selfhood in American society by selling self-confidence in a convenient externalized form. A cultural close reading suggests people should accept the monster in the mirror because it is your friend; it is you.

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