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Where are the Wild Things?

The location of monsters can be just as important as how they look or what they do because where a monster is located says something about how that monster will act and why it might act that way. A monster might live in a far-off place because it hates the company of humans, or has never met one. Jeffrey Cohen is a Professor of English at George Washington University, and wrote his piece about seven theses he proposes and supports about monster from a cultural standpoint. David Gilmore is a Professor of Anthropology at Stony Brook University, and focuses his piece on the historical elements of monsters and gets into psychological analysis. Both Cohen and Gilmore tend to agree that the location of a monster is in a far-off land where the imaginations of humans can have greater liberty as to the monster’s ways. This argument is valid, yet it seems to miss the point addressed in Sendak’s book that this space is liminal and ever changing as humans develop.

In *Where the Wild Things are,* the monsters are located in a liminal space, a place between places, and this location changes from foreign to familiar, and along with that transformation, the monsters become less fearsome. In his piece, Gilmore argues that “monsters…live in borderline places” but also that these places “lie parallel to…the human community,” so that they interact with humans, but not enough for humans to be familiar with the creatures. (Gilmore 2) Cohen adds and modifies this claim in that humans uses the geographical separation between themselves and the unknown to project unwanted characteristics onto the monster, creating an “Other” that the humans can separate themselves from both geographically and mentally. (Cohen 16-18) Gilmore’s analysis can be seen in the actual location of the Wild Things. To Max, he is travelling to a distant land far from his own, but it is understood that he is really in his room the entire time. For Gilmore, Max is straddling this liminal boundary between the world he considers that of the monsters and the world of reality. The application of Cohen’s ideas plays out a little differently; however, as Max projects the characteristics that initially got him sent to his room on to the wild things. This, like Cohen suggests is a way for Max to separate himself from his bad actions and make peace with what he did. The space that the wild things occupy does change throughout the narrative, though, because Max transfers from his room to this land and back. Additionally, while Max is in the land, there is the starting notion that Max is the center of attention when “they made him king,” but over the course of the rumpus, transforms into a place where he is “lonely.” (Sendak 29) This boarder region changes as Max comes to understand it better, not just a fixed location, as Gilmore suggested.

Gilmore and Cohen both have valid and relating arguments. Monsters occupy space that is distant, but still liminal in the sense that they are able to interact with humans, and they also represent the rejection of the qualities humans find negative so that the geographical separation of monster separates humans from these bad things. Max uses the monsters as a way to shed his guilt and learn from his mistakes as he ventures into this world. The monsters represent his wild, uncontrollable side and qualms those features as he puts the monsters to sleep and returns home. The location of the monsters is very important because it is close enough to contact the monsters and create a connection, but distant enough that Max can separate himself from them. This is important for understanding how humans look at each other on a global scale. As distances shrink due to new technologies, old misconceptions and beliefs about “other” groups of people are disappearing. Soon, humans will not be able to project their negative qualities on other people because they will be too inter connected.

Works Cited

1. Cohen, Jeffery, ed. “Monster Culture: Seven Theses.” *Monster Theory: Reading culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996. Pp. 3-20.

2. Gilmore, David D. “How to Approach Monsters.” *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003. Print.

3. Sendak, Maurice. *Where the Wild Things are*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991. Print.