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Who’s afraid of Aliens?

I have often thought that *Star Trek: The Original Series,* is a very mixed bunch of shows. Trying to incorporate subjects from racial equality to political tensions, all while making a show that is suitable for mainstream network television of the 1960’s. The show thus had episodes that delved into the darkest and hardest of social and philosophical issues, and episodes that did not reach too far beyond slapstick and comedy. On a time when the general public had a lot on its’ mind, *Star Trek* found a way to embody the multitude of fears that the viewing public had into its shows in a safe, appropriate way. The creators of *Star Trek* did not simply limit themselves to social or current issues, by touching on constant human fears as well as current ones, the creators of the show were able to better connect their audience to the characters and the issues at hand. In the second season episode “Obsession,” Kirk encounters an alien smoke cloud from his past and embodies the fear of failing others, a fear that most people have as people generally do not like to disappoint others. In the first season episode “The Devil in the Dark,” the crew of the Enterprise confront an alien that has been attacking miners, embodying the fear that our actions, while unintentionally harmful, may come back to get us. For the characters in *Star Trek*, the alien creatures represents the two forms of fear addressed above: the first is a fear of failing expectations, the fear humans feel when they fall short on their obligations, real or not, to another; while the second is a broader societal fear that eventually our actions will have consequences. These two fears are represented in the aliens’ motives, the resulting motives in the characters, actions, and locations as each plays a part to further the reactions and impacts in the characters, and thus the audience.

The aliens represent fears to the crew because their motivations are not explicit, fear arises when the humans are unsure of the creatures goals. This is very evident in “The Devil in the Dark,” where the Horta (the alien) constantly attacks the personnel of the mining colony for no apparent reason. To the humans, the mining planet is a treasure trove, home to tons and tons of precious metals and other valuables needed for the futuristic setting. Then, seemingly at random, a creature begins to kill the workers. The workers are afraid because they do not want to be killed, that much is explicit. This more direct form of fear is presented in the photography of several scenes, in which the dramatic lighting and point-of-view shots from the monster (much like *Jaws*) creates tension in the viewing audience and the character. The objective fear is easy enough to look at. The more interesting factor in this episode is rooted in the reasons behind the Horta’s attacks. As revealed in the story arc, the Horta is actually the last of its species, and is getting ready to give birth to a whole new generation before it dies. The miners have, in fact, been inadvertently destroying the Horta’s eggs. For the creature, the humans are the strange aliens coming onto her planet and senselessly killing her people. Her motivation, then, for striking out against the humans is that of self-preservation. The humans’ only motivation at first was to get riches from the planet, but because of their actions, the Horta starts attacking. Thus it is a result of motivations from both parties that a sense of fear is created, perhaps in both parties. To the humans, the monster represents not only a threat to their lives, but the alien is meant to serve as a greater metaphor for the environment. It represents the fear that someday, humans will have to deal with the actions they have taken against the environment, just as the miners are in a perilous situation because of their damage to the planet. This fear is only implied by the situation of the plot, but is important in understanding how humans make decisions and deal with fear. Humans do not always see the direct consequences of their actions and as a result can cause much unintentional harm. The event that truly saves this story is that the miners and the Horta are able to understand each other’s motives through Mr. Spock. He performs a mind meld and speaks on the Horta’s behalf. Once the humans and the alien are able to fully communicate, they are able to understand why each party is doing what they are doing. With this misconception of motives out of the way, the two groups are able to work together for the better.

Motives can be defined, however; fear can be even greater when it is understood exactly what someone’s motives are, because it gives light to actions that might be taken. Kirk is a central figure to this episode’s plot, and his motivation to kill the smoke creature is what drives him through the whole episode. It is important to understand where Kirk’s motivations come from so that his actions and the fear in both him and the crew can be understood. In his Seven Theses, Jeffery Cohen analyses how a culture constructs its creatures and states that we depict monsters with the characteristics we do not want show so we can separate ourselves from them by calling them an “other.” (Cohen 17) Gilmore builds off of this by adding in a psychological element to the analysis that we visualize monsters as combinations of characteristics of ourselves, both things that are pleasant and things that are not. (Gilmore 16, 17) A totally psychological process in which humans shed their negative characteristics into an opposing force and call it monster. This is Kirks’ reaction when he deals with the smoke creature for the second time. In his first encounter, Kirk froze with hesitation and was unable to save the lives of his captain and crew. To distance himself from those hard memories and feelings, Kirk projects his feelings of guilt, anger and regret into the monster so that he can become the definitive “good guy” and the creature the “bad guy,” thus justifying in Kirk’s mind his desire to kill it. Jones argues that these projections are not so much a conscious choice, however, and as a result of subconscious processes. (Jones 305) With the addition of Jones’ Jungian analysis, it can be understood that Kirk did not make the conscious choice to project his feeling upon the creature, but that the emotion so engrossed him that his subconscious mind placed these characteristics upon the smoke creature. This is important to understand because Kirk’s motivations are the driving force for this episode. Much like Captain Ahab’s lust for killing the whale, Kirk too is consumed by the unquenchable thirst to have the satisfaction of completing his duty and avenging his lost commanders. The creature on the other hand is very difficult to analyze because unlike in “The Devil in the Dark” where the creature was given a voice, this alien has no voice, and its motivations can only be inferred by its actions. To both the crew and the audience, it is unclear if this creature is simply of an animal mind, seeking food when needed and hunting prey, or if the creature has some degree of intelligence to it, actively seeking out the crew and specifically Kirk. If it was an animal then its’ motivations would be rather simple: it is merely trying to survive, and its food just happens to be human blood. It could be argued with his that the creature is not intentionally trying to grief Kirk and the crew, but just going about its natural business. While possible, for the purpose of the story that is being told, and it’s relation to *Moby Dick,* the creature must be thought of as to have something else to its character. Even if it is not explicit, there is an intrinsic quality to the creature that lends itself to some intelligence and malicious evil that it does not seem wholly natural. If it had some degree of human intelligence, however, then its motivations become more interesting and more speculative. The creature could be determined to specifically hunt Kirk because Kirk is the target that it missed years ago, and is now locked in a power match with Kirk. The crew is afraid for their lives, Kirk is afraid he will disappoint himself by letting down his crew and the memory of his fallen commanders, and the creature at one point is afraid for its own life.

It is important to understand the motives of the various players because motives lead to actions, and these actions can both be in response to fear-induced motives, or themselves cause fear. In “The Devil in the Dark,” the conflicting motives of the miners and the Horta cause the two sides to act against each other. The miners want minerals, but inadvertently kill the Horta’s young, and the Horta wants the miners to stop killing her babies. It is then in this struggle that fear is created because each side wants the other dead. The miners are afraid to die, and the Horta is afraid to die as well as afraid her species will die. These fears are then enhanced for the miners and the audience because of the eerie atmosphere in the caves. Often when the miners are killed, they are all alone in the dark, where no one can help them. This kind of situation would scare just about anyone because it is a very vulnerable situation with dark lights and narrow corridors. The humans’ lives are on the line and they are unable to adequately defend themselves from the attacks of the Horta. This is how the creature is monstrous to the miners: it makes them afraid for their lives. Very much is the same for the smoke creature in “Obsession.” The crew of the Enterprise is afraid of the creature because they know it can and likely will kill them. In this case there is no confusion of motives; each side is clearly trying their hardest to kill the other, either for food or safety. In this case, action directly causes fear. Similar to “The Devil in the Dark,” though, the fear in “Obsession” is built up through the photography of the episode and its location. This story takes place on a distant and untamed world where there is little help for the crew if they should need it. The monster resides in a far away land, as Cohen puts it, on the boundary between the developed world and the unknown. (Cohen 12) This as a setting causes some tension as the Enterprise cannot have a backup plan if something were to go wrong, the fear of no safety is always present throughout the episode. Additionally, much of the episode takes place on this deserted planet, another step removed from the safety of the ship and civilization.

The two creatures from these episodes of *Star Trek* are labeled as monstrous because of the fear and psychological stress they cause in the humans. In one case, the label of monster is just a place holder for understanding until the crew can realize the intentions and reasoning behind the Horta. In the other, the label seems quite appropriate as the alien is never shown to be anything but a killer. It is important to understand why things are called monstrous because it indicates how humans protect themselves and react in many situations. For people, monsters cause fear because of they tend to kill and destroy things that humans care about. Things and creatures that perform these actions receive a label of monster as a warning to other humans so that other humans can predict the monster’s behavior and act to preserve what they care about. The miners call the Horta a monster because it kills, and this way they can communicate to the Enterprise that this creature has bad intentions, as far as they know. While monster may just be a label, it is a powerful label because it has the authority to cause fear in people, which is an amazingly strong motivator.

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. Jones, Kevin. “Star Trek and the Intimate Alien.” *The Soul of Popular Culture*. Ed. Mary Kittelson. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1998. 304-314. Print.

Metacognitive Piece

For this piece I really wanted to tie together essentially my though process on monsters for the entire quarter. I decided to write my paper in a slightly more organized way that is essentially the thought process specified to the topic of *Star Trek.* The structure was designed to do two things at the same time, on the one hand, develop, analyze and complete my thesis; but the other intention was to frame exactly what a monster was with my newer definition. I was able to incorporate the two into the same structure by completing my thesis along the lines of my monster development. I think this makes the development of the monster seem more natural and progressive to the reader, allowing them to develop my personal definition while they also analyze my thesis. Also with the structure, I wanted to make it very clear just how I was organizing my paper, because in the past I know that my papers have been lacking in the organization and this has affected not only the readability, but the strength of my argument. By making my structure more defined and clear, the reader doesn’t have to work extra hard just to understand what I am trying to say. I left my conclusion rather short or purpose, and I did this because I felt I had gone into so much depth in the body paragraphs, that if I tried to put too much into the end, it would sound too much like summary. I think by having minimal conclusion and focusing mostly on stakes in the last paragraph allows the reader to get a better sense of closure on both the argument that I have presented and the initial study of monsters. It also gives the reader a little bit of a break in the end after having very long body paragraphs. The long body paragraphs were a choice more by default, because I felt I couldn’t separate some ideas from a paragraph without having to develop them on their own, which would have taken up too much space and been a distraction from the topics. Also it would have made the organization I talked about earlier a lot worse.