

Dehumanization and Demonization: The Evil Monsters of Myths and Real-life  
The Use of the Words “Evil” and “Monster” to Demonize and Dehumanize Violent Criminals

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Todd leaned forward, tanned elbows on bluejeaned knees. "Sure. The firing squads. The gas chambers. The ovens. The guys who had to dig their own graves and then stand on the ends so they'd fall into them. The . . ." His tongue came out and wetted his lips. "The examinations. The experiments. Everything. All the gooshy stuff."

Dussander stared at him with a certain amazed detachment, the way a veterinarian might stare at a cat who was giving birth to a succession of two-headed kittens. "You are a monster," he said softly.

Stephen King,  
"Apt Pupil" from *Different Seasons*

Throughout history, societies have decided that certain human beings are unworthy of being considered human beings. These "non-humans" have often been defined this way because of something they have done that makes the society around them see them as beings with which they would not like to associate. Discovering how societies do this, who they do this to, and why they do this is important to understanding what exactly being "human" means in a philosophical sense and what it means to how we should treat other living beings. What does it mean to be "inhuman", and what is our responsibility to those who are considered inhuman by society?

One very effective way of defining someone as inhuman is by associating them with that which is *evil* and/or *monstrous*. What is considered *monstrous* and/or *evil* is a highly debated and discussed topic in nearly all the social sciences, but it has been a fundamental question in religion and mythology. The selection quoted above is a conversation between a Nazi war criminal and the thirteen year old all-American boy who has decided to blackmail him for his stories. It is an example of one author's attempt to explore what it means to be a *monster* and invent a narrative that shows how one could react to what is invariably described as ultimate *evil*—Nazism and the Holocaust. In the genre of fiction the concepts of the *monstrous* and the *evil* are a heavily described and explored topic of interest. Creating narratives that

demonstrate ways to look at and deal with *evil* and *monsters*, and other aspects of life, is a very fundamental way that people understand the world around them. Everyone would agree that religion and mythology—whether they are lumped together under one subject or not—are mostly based on symbolic approach to the world that creates grand or meta-narratives that teaches people how they should lead their lives. The words *evil* and *monster* both have strong mythological and religious backgrounds in their etymologies and ancient and modern definitions. Used within the contexts of modern religion and in narratives that are meant to entertain, they both have an ability to teach. Within these contexts, the people, characters, and beings that these narratives usually refer to as *monstrous* and *evil* most often symbolize creatures and actions that cannot be explained by science and logic. Because the words *monster* and *evil* gain their meaning from mythology and religion, when they are used to explain or describe human beings they have the tendency to turn that human being into something that is “inhuman” or “not quite human.”

When human beings see other human beings as inhuman, the social impact is terrifying and can have horrible consequences for the “no longer humans.” Society uses these descriptions of the *evil* and/or the *monstrous* and uses it on non-fictional people who have done something that society does not want to deal with. As a society, we are not willing to understand what these supposed “human beings” have done, and do our best to put them as far away from ourselves as possible. Literally demonizing and dehumanizing them becomes the easiest and most effective way of doing this. Those that are no longer humans, after all, do not have to be treated with compassion, respect, or tolerance: they can be socially or physically killed without a moment’s hesitation. What these words do to these “former people” is best

described in the word created by Donna Haraway: they are made “killable” (80). Haraway, in this context, is referring to members of non-human species like dogs, but it applies to human society’s attitude to all that do not fit into our idealistic mold of humanity. She states that the problem brought about by the fundamental ethic of religions and civilizations around the world, “Thou shalt not kill”, “is not figuring out to whom it applies so that ‘other’ killing can go on as usual. . .” (80). The problem is that denying living beings mutual respect by turning them into the “other” because we do not want to acknowledge them as “like us” makes this “other” killable.

## **Etymology**

To understand how the words *evil* and *monster* have become powerful social tools against those society wishes to make “killable”, the etymology of these words must be explored. The meanings of the words *evil* and *monster* have changed throughout history and adapted themselves to modern times. However, the root etymology of the words still has a great deal of impact on what they mean today. Therefore, it is important to discover what the words have meant throughout history in order to understand how they evolved over time.

### ***Evil***

Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary defines the word *evil* as “morally reprehensible, sinful, wicked; arising from actual or imputed bad character or conduct; causing harm, pernicious”. The Oxford English Dictionary adds to that definition: “the antithesis of good in all its principal senses”. These definitions suggest a change from the archaic definition of the word that, according to Merriam-Webster, was “inferior, causing discomfort or repulsion, offensive, disagreeable”. This shows that the word *evil* has actually grown graver than its original use.

According to the OED, the word *evil* did not come to mean "extreme moral wickedness" until the 18<sup>th</sup> century introduction of the "evil eye". The evil eye is defined by the OED as "a look of ill-will; a malicious or envious look which, in popular belief, had the power of doing material harm; also, the faculty, superstitiously ascribed to certain individuals, of inflicting injury by a look".

The change from a general word for "that which is bad" into a word that was associated with the power to inflict harm by a look underscores the supernatural element of the word. Modern societies have ascribed the word *evil* with a "moral reprehensibility" and maliciousness that it did not have before. Combining this definition with the supernatural connotations of the "evil eye", we can see how the word *evil* can be problematic when labeling a human and/or their actions as such. When societies use the word *evil* to describe people and their actions, they are ascribing them with a supernatural quality that cannot be understood in a logical, scientific framework.

### ***Monster***

The word *monster* comes from the Latin word "monstrum" meaning "a prodigy or portent" (that which reveals and warns) and "monere" meaning "to show or to warn" (Gilmore 9). David Gilmore explains the importance of this etymology on the eventual modern definition and use of the word in his book Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors: "monsters have been part of a semiotic culture of divination, metaphors, messages, indications of deeper meaning or inspiration" (9). Gilmore also explains that the word has religious and supernatural root because for holy men "monsters came under the headings of God's creations and therefore must have some revealed meaning: 'monstrations'

or warnings from God, directing attention to deviations from the true path in the symbolic allegorical form” (10). The *monsters* were not humans, they were messages and warnings from God about things gone awry, but they did sometimes come in human form. This concept of monsters as messages and warnings from God is not far from what the word *monster* has been taken to mean in the modern world. Humans that are labeled as *monsters* are often seen as examples for society—examples of how not to act or be. How and why human *monsters* are messages and warnings will be explored further in the explanation for why society creates a need for *monsters* and *evil*.

*Monster* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, among other definitions, as “a person of repulsively unnatural character, or exhibiting such extreme cruelty or wickedness as to appear inhuman; a monstrous example of evil, a vice, etc; an ugly or deformed person, animal, or thing”. In this definition we find references both to being “inhuman” and “evil”. It is an interesting discovery that the word *monster* has a relatively harmless etymology, much like the early use of the word *evil*. However, it is clear that in the definition of monster there is an extreme component of being “unnatural”, “wicked”, “inhuman”, and “evil”. This definition combined with the etymology shows how someone that is described as a *monster* or *monstrous* is attributed with supernatural characteristics, like with the word *evil*, which does not allow them to be seen as human beings.

### **Evil Monsters in the Real World**

The uses of the words *evil* and *monster* vary greatly over the expanse of history. Violent actions and actors are the ones most often labeled as *evil* and/or *monstrous*. Any person in history who has been classically defined as *evil* or a *monster* has probably committed varying

degrees of atrocities and violent crimes. Specific examples range from the atrocities of the Holocaust and Adolf Hitler to serial killers like Aileen Wournous and Jeffrey Dahmer. “Lesser” crimes, such as molestation and rape, are also put into the category of *monstrous* or *evil*. To enumerate the countless people who have been labeled this way would be impossible. However, discovering the kinds of acts and people that are labeled this way is revealing when attempting to make a hypothesis as to why society labels people this way.

### ***Social Failure***

It has been explained that words like *monster* and *evil* have a supernatural or unnatural meaning attached to them. This supernatural quality comes from the religious backgrounds of those words as well as the way we qualify actions in human beings as “natural” or “unnatural” as a way of trying to understand what exactly “human nature” is; therefore, we are trying to define what exactly a “human being” is. The people attributed with these qualities range from people with physical deformities to what could be considered “mental deformities”. In the past, people with physical deformities were thought to have been afflicted with the deformities by God in order to show that they were deformed on the inside as well. For example, Shakespeare’s *Richard III* was, by his own admonition, “curtail’d of this fair proportion, / Cheated of feature by dissembling nature, / Deformed, unfinish’d . . .”, and he then “determined to prove a villain” (I.i.9-11). The idea that monstrous features would coincide with a monstrous mind has changed with the advent of modern science. People are now more concerned with people who act, rather than look, “unnaturally”.

In all societies there is a certain normative idealization that is attributed to the quality of being human. People *should* be a great deal of things: in the U.S. they are expected to be

white, male, middle-class, married, protestant, etc. This sets up what all people in U.S. should aspire to, even when it is not physically possible for the vast majority within it. Anyone who is not the ideal “norm” is thereby marked by their otherness. This idealization of a human being goes beyond simple normative expectations of what a human being should be like and often asserts what specific types of people should act like. For example, women are expected to enact a certain culturally specific stereotype. Two of the most common of the many acts women are expected to perform is being subordinate to men to have children. Not only are they expected to reproduce, but they are expected to “mother”. If we prescribe to the idea that “mothering” is something that all mothers do and can do, we would expect all women who birth children to act a certain way toward their children. These acts, after centuries of repetition, are most often considered naturalized in all women. Therefore, mothers who fail at this act of “mothering” are seen as having unnatural characteristics. Depending on how severely they fail, these women can be seen as having monstrous qualities. Specifically, the story of Susan Smith is one that bred a great deal of contempt from society. After murdering her children and blaming it on “some black man”, she was certainly not fulfilling her role as a mother. In the article “Monster Making: A Politics of Persuasion”, Edward Ingebretsen explores the idea that the people societies label as *monsters* are usually in that category because the “failure of our specific social roles is everyone’s private crisis” (29).

There are, of course, many ways that one could fail in their social roles. Some more familiar examples are of serial killers like Jeffrey Dahmer and John Wayne Gacy and, the most infamous mass murderer, Adolf Hitler. Dahmer and Gacy are perfect examples of “bad neighbors”. What most people expect from their neighbors and acquaintances is polite



indifference. After it was discovered that Dahmer and Gacy were serial killers, the reaction by those who knew them was shock at how “normal” they seemed. The world was forced to see the possibility that the people around them may not be as innocuous as they had seemed.

Looking at Adolf Hitler in the context of his social failures, one can see that of all the things his ambition drove him to achieve, he failed to be a leader to a large group of people that he labeled as subhuman, the Jews. Indeed, his goal was to destroy specific groups of people for the purpose of a “better Germany” and many Germans did flourish under his regime. However, his ultimate failure was in failing to see the groups he tried to destroy as human beings and lead them towards a better Germany. There is much, much more to these cases than social failure.

But the point is whether or not it serves a purpose to label Dahmer, Gacy, or Hitler as monsters of evil? Some would say they do not deserve any better treatment than they gave their victims; but, what does the fact that Hitler used the subhuman excuse for Jews mean for our use of it to dismiss him as human being? It is a slippery slope that runs a dangerous risk of recreating the same ignorance again and again. Ingebretson, referring to Jeffrey Dahmer, states that “[h]owever horrible Dahmer’s actions might have been, dealing with him as if he were a celluloid creature from late night fright TV is neither ethically sound nor intellectually promising” (Ingebretsen 27).

Susan Smith as the anti-mother, Jeffrey Dahmer as the bad neighbor, and Adolf Hitler as the anti-leader (some say, Anti-Christ) are all examples of this social failure. Failing in these social roles plays an important part in society seeing them as more like lessons than human beings: “...every society needs a stigmatized person... whose function it is to provide readily moralized examples of how not to think and act” (26). Defining these people as monsters and

using the etymological history of the word to then use them as messages and warnings reassures the rest of society that we are not like them. Ingebretson explains it this way: “The monster... reconfirms the virtues of the normal for those who... need persuading” (25). This tendency to label people as monsters or evil because they have failed in their social roles is important in understanding where the need to explain away people who commit violent crimes and atrocities comes from. Why, as human beings, do we feel the need to dismiss people we do not understand?

### **Narrative Meaning**

One way of understanding the mentality of human beings towards that which they do not understand is to explore the way human beings understand the world around them. A fundamental way of understanding what is going on in the world is to create or refer to a narrative story that explains the way things work. A meta-narrative, like Christianity or other religions, works to explain the world by encompassing all of the stories we have about certain aspects of the world with a larger story. Within these meta-narratives there are stories about ways to deal with things that do not seem to fit, work, or belong within the ways we would like to see the world. These stories will either prompt us to find a deeper understanding of or to dismiss that which does not seem to fit.

### ***Popular Culture and the Media***

When someone like Susan Smith or Jeffrey Dahmer appears in the world, the media and the rest of society describe them the way we would a fictional monster in a story, novel, or movie. These are the stories that persist in society throughout history because they do a service of describing these monsters and, inevitably, ridding them from society. All of the

classic examples are apt: Frankenstein, Dracula, etc. All of these stories describe monsters as other-worldly, subhuman, and unnatural in some way. According to David Gilmore, “for most Western observers the monster is a metaphor for all that must be repudiated by the human spirit” (12). This metaphor reinforces the strong symbolic background that we have in narratives and mythologies (such as religion and other meta-narratives). “Monsters contain that numinous quality of awe mixed with horror and terror that unites the evil and the sublime in a single symbol: that which is beyond the human, the superhuman, the unnamable, the tabooed, the terrible, and the unknown” (10). More post-modern stories, like those of Hannibal Lector and some of the more recent horror films, portray the *monster* as closer to being human than a big, scary monster like Frankenstein’s monster. This portrayal of them as more human makes it more difficult to identify them as a *monster*, but it gives credence to anyone who refers to real-life humans as monsters based on what they have done. When we label people like Dahmer, Hitler, and Smith as monsters we are ascribing them with a narrative meaning.

It is important to note that the meanings of words are not strictly relegated to their definitions. They can have copious semantic meanings for individuals, but, most importantly, they are shaped by the culture that uses them. “Our understanding of evil is always enculturated in circulation around (and through) us” (Turnau 384). Culture plays a large part in the creation of these narratives; these narratives come from more than just old stories/folklore, religion, and other mythology. In the article “Inflecting the World: Popular Culture and the Perception of Evil”, Theodore Turnau explains how popular culture can affect the way we see the world and how we see and understand *evil* within it. He argues that the “direct assault

model” which states that we simply absorb the popular culture we watch, play, or listen to and come to believe it through replay and repetition falls short of explaining the effects of popular culture on society (385). He argues that the “theory of narrative representation” by theorist Paul Ricoeur’s is the most comprehensive theory of how we absorb culture and use it in our daily lives (386). This theory states that art is “a creative and interpretive imitation of the human world” and that “stories project worlds that render human reality understandable” (386). Turnau explains that “Popular culture presents us with a panoply of world’s for habitation, no less than literature...”; however, “popular culture is not merely the lounge of passive minds, but offers worlds for active inhabitation and interpretation” (388). In other words, popular culture has undoubtedly affected the way people see the world and how they interact within it, but Turnau insists that there is always “... a struggle between the creative pull of the producer and the creative freedom of the reader” (388). Audiences have the choice to either accept it and absorb it without question, or keep their autonomy and work to combat the narratives they are given.

What this ultimately means for society is that the growing access to technology and the immediacy of these images is making it harder to combat the new narratives or new twists on old narratives. Popular culture is an often studied part of society that has become more prevalent because of the increase in access to technology, the continuous improvements made in technology, and the way technology presents itself to the people. Through movies, video games, and other forms of media, people are being confronted with narratives on all sides. Combining these media forms with social and cultural meta-narratives, we are bombarded with ways of looking at and understanding the world.

### ***Fear and Vulnerability***

How this relates to the way people view violent crimes/criminals, human monsters, and evil is that “The popular media are quick to identify murderers, rapists and others as monsters” (Cole 15). In Phillip Cole’s book The Myth of Evil, he explains that the narrative theory goes beyond direct stories that we are confronted with through popular media. He explains that the myth of evil often involves what he calls the “monstrous conception” of evil (13). The media portrays these *monsters* as “a distinct class, different from the rest of humanity, with a different nature—they are not like you and me” (13). This “they are not like you and me” attitude comes from the fact that “we use the monstrous conception of evil . . . to hide not from monsters, but from ourselves” (15). The fact is that monsters “represent our fears and insecurities around death or other repressed complexes and beliefs, or they represent our own monstrosity, our capacity for destructive evil intent” (119). What this boils down to is a deep-seated fear and vulnerability. We are afraid of not only what these *monsters* will do, could do, and have done, but what the fact that they exist says about what it is that makes us human. Describing them as inhuman, a class onto themselves, defines them away from us; therefore, we do not need to understand how it is they came to be or act that way. After all, if they are truly *monsters*, then that is all the explanation that is needed.

Cole argues that “‘evil’ as an idea is used to fill a space of incomprehension” (150). We cannot understand how a human being could do these things, and we do not want to understand because of our fear of what it might mean to be related to those people that commit those acts. Cole states that “they threaten to destabilize our conception of ourselves as human beings, indeed our conception of humanity itself” (118). The media, politicians, and

others enforce this fear by portraying anyone that has done violence against us or our country as the “evildoers”. Everyone from the terrorists that attacked on September 11<sup>th</sup> to the pirates from Somalia that kidnapped our people has been described as inhuman, *evil*, and *monsters*. The media and politicians develop an image of the terrorists as *monsters* that “pursue our destruction for its own sake”, and that there is “no possibility of negotiation and compromise” (231). This plays on our already vulnerable state, and it enforces our distance from them as human beings.

This distance is reinforced when we get absolutely no context to understand why it happened. We cannot understand and, hopefully, prevent something like this from happening again if we cannot, at least, understand the place that the terrorists come from. Phillip Cole states that “... We can understand why people do dreadful things if we are prepared to examine the detail of the background context against which they act” (150). This is of vital importance if we ever hope to understand the background context of violent criminals, and then be able to try to prevent these atrocities from happening.

### ***Good vs. Evil***

In a world full of shades of gray, our need to define the world in black and white terms is based on the narratives that shape our understanding of the world. Understanding the world through the meta-narratives of religion, culture, and popular media teaches us to see the world in these terms. Even with the copious narratives that we are bombarded with everyday, it is not a well-rounded and detailed explanation of the world. We create a world of binaries that does not allow us to see the shades of gray. It is, simply put, the easiest way to identify and categorize people and things: war and peace, life and death, black and white, good and evil.

The OED defines the word evil as “the antithesis of good in all its principal senses”. If we use this binary to explain human actors and actions, we are not accounting for the complexity of the human experience. If we understand the word evil as having supernatural or unnatural explanation, it’s easier to define people and actions this way. But if we have a scientific or rational understanding of the word, it cannot exist purely in the real-world. “[T]he scientific approach seeks to understand, the opposing view seeks to condemn” (Cole 12). And, what good does it do to condemn without an attempt to understand?

### **The Power of Narrative and Language**

We use words to describe everything around us. The purpose of language is to communicate ideas to each other in order to live together. We use stories to transmit these ideas to each other, whether directly or through the story that each word contains as to its meaning and effect. This makes language very powerful. When we define others through these words and stories, we must be knowledgeable of what those words are expressing to others. As a language based society, we have an ethical responsibility to consider how those words effect the people we use them on.

#### ***The Narrative***

The selection at the beginning of the paper is from a fictional short story by Stephen King that tells the story of a young boy who finds out that one of his neighbors is a Nazi war criminal and, instead of turning him in, he blackmails the old man into telling him all of his horrible stories from the war. The young boy has developed a disturbing fascination with the Holocaust, specifically the concentration camps, after seeing old war magazines. This story follows the two characters as they find out more about each other and themselves. It follows

their struggle to accept themselves—the Nazi sees himself and the other as clearly monstrous, the boy is only slowly realizing it for himself—and descent into committing horrible acts in search of a very human need—comfort in others and in themselves. King shows these characters in both a monstrous and human way: They struggle with their disturbing thoughts, actions, and needs in the way most people struggle with these every day. The narrative closure of the story is in the death of both of these characters. The narrative closure point is one that most violent criminals end up in in the real world. If we turn the violent criminals into monsters, the only way to dispose of these killable creatures is through death. There is no mourning in these deaths, it is simply the way our meta-narratives teach us it must be.

As a narrative closure point to the story of “The Evil Monsters”, *monsters* are needed in society because they allow us to define ourselves as human by defining them as inhuman. In “Monster Making”, Edward Ingebretsen points out that today’s *monsters* in human form are important to society because “. . . the ongoing stability of any society depends upon the presence of monsters—those unfortunates whom social regulatory systems fail, and whose monstrosity, however, marked, can be pointed to precisely as demonstrations of that failure” (25). The purpose of this narrative closure point is to teach each of us a lesson about how we must act in order to be considered human. They are examples of how you do not act, but, more importantly, examples of how we have created monsters of ourselves by failing as a society in creating these monsters. Instead of realizing this and doing something about it, we blame the violent criminals for harming society and use them as scapegoats for our failure. Blaming them means we do not have to blame ourselves: “the monster, then, is both symptom of civic distress as well as antidote” (29).



### ***The Language***

Ingebretson states that “by locating the monstrous person at the edge of the social map, the normal center is mapped and secured as well” (26). Monsters are simply scary, awful, horrifying creatures that need to be eliminated and evil is an abstract metaphysical, inhuman characteristic that is beyond our understanding; if we label people this way, we do not need to understand their connection to us. Using these words in non-theoretical terms does not assist us understanding, it only assists us in maintaining ignorance: “the idea of evil does not help us to understand these things at all; rather, it takes on the role of the Satan of the Hebrew Bible: it obstructs our understanding, blocks our way, brings us to a halt” (Cole 236).

It is more than just violent criminals that are labeled this way. We do this to other groups of people that we refuse to understand: “the impulse to create monsters stems from the need of the majority to denigrate those who are different, be they lower class, foreigners, or marginalized deviant groups” (Gilmore 14). The words monster or evil do not even have to be used in order to turn people into less than human. Our attitude and treatment towards “lesser people” is what turns them killable, or at least ignorable.

The attitude and words used by politicians, the media, and others in power are, however, enough to dismiss people as human beings. “The power to name and identify; to establish legitimacy and thus to create deviancy and to legalize it as criminality—this is true power. When we wish to do violence and don’t want to leave marks, words are nice and will suffice” (Ingebretson 30). They may not leave a physical mark, but the easiest way to mark people out of the human race is by the words we use to describe them. The words refer to

those narratives that give them power and influence society through manipulating the language we use to describe the world.

“The most oppressive chains we cast are those spells—words—by which we nominate and transfix people in categories of likeness and deviancy” (Ingebretson 30). When we place people into these categories, do we have any responsibility to their further treatment? How do we treat living beings when they are no longer considered human? Based on how we treat animals, we do not feel any responsibility to treat non-human living creatures humanely and with respect. And, ultimately, this means inhumane treatment towards all theoretically non-humans as well.

When we fear the inhuman, we fear being dehumanized ourselves. The fact is that it is scarier to confront a human being who did these things than a monster who has done these things because we expect a monster to act this way. If we accept the fact that human beings, and only human beings, commit these atrocities we may be able to have a clearer concept of what is human, and a better understanding of ourselves.

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