

## On beasts and monsters

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The paper discusses different well-known imagined monsters. Starting with the fairy tale and the films on *The Beauty and the Beast* (*La Belle et la Bête*), hidden meanings from several psychodynamically valid perspectives are proposed with the aim of finding out what makes this story so popular and everlasting. Projected demons or impulses in Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* are discussed as well as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and his monster who are presented and connected to facts in this author's life. In the summary links to psychoanalytic thinking are proposed.

**Keywords:** The Beauty and the Beast; monsters; Maurice Sendak; Mary Shelley; Frankenstein's monster

Beasts and monsters frequently appear in children's play and in their drawings. Adolescents love stories and films with beasts and monsters. Imaginary monsters are all over the place. Where do they all come from?

Obviously monsters represent something frightening, something repulsive, but what do children really fear? For many years in my psychoanalytic practice with children and adolescents, I was intrigued by the various monsters that entered the scene. A film and psychoanalysis seminar in Helsinki gave me the opportunity to discuss two films with monster characters. Those thoughts have now been cultivated and composed into this paper. I could have chosen clinical case material, but I find that examples from our culture allow and stimulate thinking about beasts and monsters even more meaningful.

I will review and discuss some imaginary monsters or beasts to try and identify what might be behind their scary images. I will look for hidden meanings of selected imaginary beasts or monsters beginning with the classic fairy tale "The Beauty and the Beast", then discuss Maurice Sendak's "Wild Things" before closing with some reflections on Mary Shelley's creation of Dr Frankenstein's monster.

In *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Sigmund Freud wrote "that spirits and demons are only projections of man's own impulses. He turns his emotional cathexes into persons, he peoples the world with them and meets his internal mental processes again outside himself" (p. 92). This quotation suggests that we should search for projected impulses and emotions. Freud (1901) also suggested that the mythological world is "nothing but psychology projected into the external world" (p. 258). *The Oxford Dictionary* defines a monster as a misshapen animal; an imaginary animal compounded of incongruous elements; an inhumanly wicked person; an inhuman example of cruelty. The word monster derives

from the Latin word *monstrum* or the verb *monere* which means to warn.

### Searching for the many meanings of the beauty and the beast

We can find monsters in art and culture as far back in time as we can go. One of the best-known fairy tales about monsters is "The Beauty and the Beast". The version we know today was published in 1796 in France as "La Belle et la Bête" (Le Prince de Beaumont, 1756); just 1 year later it appeared in translation in England. The best-known version today is Walt Disney's (1991) animation from 1991. The message in the fairy tale as well as in the film is that "Only the beauty that comes from within counts". The theme of this fairy tale has been found in many renditions all over the world and for thousands of years. The oldest written account is from Apuleius who in 150 AD published the collection "Metamorphoses" also known as "The Golden Ass" (Apuleius 150 A.D.). Here we find the tale of Cupid and Psyche which stems from Greek oral tradition and originates in even older Asian oral traditions.

A fantastic film (Figure 1) based on the fairy tale was made right after the Second World War by the multi-talented Frenchman and *enfant terrible* Cocteau (1946). The year was 1946 and Cocteau worked with a minimal budget and a great deal of inspiration. He wrote his own abbreviated version of the classic fairy tale. In 1994, Philip Glass composed an opera on the synopsis of Cocteau's film (Cocteau and Glass, 1995).

"The Beauty and the Beast" tells about the lovely and very modest Belle (the Beauty) who in order to save her father's life chooses to live in an enchanted castle owned by a beast. The fairy tale begins when Belle dismisses an ardent young suitor because she prefers to take care of her beloved father. The father

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Figure 1. La Belle et la Bête illustration from Cocteau's Diary of a film (p. II).

has been to town to meet his creditors and afterwards, penniless, he heads home in despair. He becomes lost in the forest, and, seeking refuge from a storm, finds an enchanted castle. In the castle lives the Beast. When the father steals a rose from the castle gardens, the Beast furiously demands that either the father's life or the life of one of his daughters be forfeited as punishment for the theft. When the father finally returns home, heartbroken, he tells his children about his fate. Fearlessly, the youngest daughter, Belle, decides to leave for the castle to take her father's place. When Belle meets the Beast for the first time she faints with fright. The Beast is a real monster, a terrifying wild fiend. In Cocteau's film, there is a remarkable Pietà atmosphere when the Beast carries Belle in his arms into his enchanted castle. At this stage in the story, the Beast is a total stranger to Belle. In his castle, Belle is extremely well cared for by invisible helpers, her smallest wish is granted, and she lacks for nothing. Every day the Beast asks Belle to marry him, but in vain. The monster is on the verge of dying when Belle realises that she loves him. The moment Belle confesses her love, a harsh spell is broken, and the Beast changes into Prince Charming. The couple live happily ever after.

Bruno Bettelheim (1975), who was interested in the meanings of fairy tales, interpreted this story from the viewpoint of a young girl's psychosexual development. Bettelheim describes how the little girl first falls in love with her father, but in adolescence, because of the taboo of incest, she has to liberate herself from her parent. As a young girl, she now has to seek and find a

new object for her love and her by-now adult sexual desire. Bettelheim emphasises that the small child experiences the adult's sexuality, that is, the parents' sexuality, as ugly, repulsive and frightening as long as the child's desire is directed towards its own parent. The child thus displaces and projects the frightening sexuality far away from herself and far away from her parents onto the Beast. During adolescence, the experience of sexuality and sexual desire develops and changes so that gradually these are experienced as less dangerous and less frightening. The adolescent's own experience of sexuality changes. Sexuality is no longer monstrous, but turns congenial when a good love object confirms it. In the tale, Belle must realise that there is something more to the beast than his scary exterior. Belle needs confirmation that inside he is something other than a monster. Bettelheim thus regards this tale as a developmental story whereby the listener can recognise her/himself. For a child, the Beast represents the frightening world of adult sexuality. Once the tale is told, there are no further scary or frightening sexual secrets. The true nature of the Beast has been revealed as good, and Belle can reclaim her love and transfer it and her desires from her father to the Beast. In that instant, the Beast changes into Prince Charming.

#### Beauty, femininity and the father

I will examine how Cocteau's film skilfully uses symbols to illustrate female sexuality and the female inner space. Magically, he creates Belle's room in the enchanted castle (Cocteau, 1972). The sensuous space is part garden, part wild forest; it is simultaneously tame, cultivated and wild. Belle bathes in jewellery and expensive clothing during her adolescence, as she tries to adopt an adult woman's outer attributes while at the same time attempting to own her inner space. She first regresses to a narcissistic phase, "Her Majesty the Baby", in which invisible hands fulfil her every wish. The fairy tale becomes a developmental story about a girl's path to heterosexual female adulthood, whose inner space is integrated into a valuable part of herself. Her desires are turned outwards and confirmed by a new object of adulation.

This is one of the themes that have fascinated listeners and readers for hundreds of years. This fairy tale can also be studied from a masculine perspective: both from the father's viewpoint and from a boy's. First, however, we shall examine a father-daughter perspective. In Cocteau's film, the father gets lost in the forest on his return home. Upset, he finds himself before a castle. As the father approaches the entrance, his own shadow expands threateningly in front of him. This image portends danger. It is the father who finds the Beast. Is there an incest desire hidden in the fairy

tale? The father, who is a widower, is now also poor and unhappy. He has three daughters and one good-for-nothing son. The two older daughters are pompous and quarrelsome. If the father could keep his affectionate and humble daughter Belle as his companion, his life would be fine. In the tale, Belle asks her father to bring her a rose from town, whereas her sisters demand expensive gifts. The rose is a well-known symbol of sexuality. When the father plucks the rose, does that represent fatherly love as well as being a symbol of lost chastity? The moment the father plucks the rose, the Beast threateningly appears. The Beast now demands the life of either the father or his daughter. Is this the father's imagined punishment for his own desires, his wishes and fantasies to possibly commit incest? If I take my daughter as my wife, will I then turn into a monster or will I be put to death?

Belle leaves her home to take her father's place in the Beast's castle, but it takes a great deal of courage and inner strength to renounce her familiar, safe and secure family life. It requires spirit to find a new object for her desires. Feminists have emphasised Belle's independence and fearlessness.

With his beloved Belle gone, the father loses interest in life. Through a magic mirror Belle learns that her father is dying. The Beast now allows her to visit her father. When Belle returns home the father immediately gets well in her company.

It is noteworthy that a mother character is completely lacking in this fairy tale. In film versions of the Beauty and the Beast tale, there is neither a fairy nor any other bad or scary female figure such as a witch.

### **The beast, the boy and the man**

Changing perspective this storyline can also be studied from a boy's point of view. In the last scenes of Cocteau's film, a young man, the suitor Avenant, is transformed into a Beast (his face magically changed). The young man forces his way into Diana's pavilion to steal the riches hidden there. Diana's pavilion is the Beast's treasury. Early in the film, the Beast promises Belle everything he keeps there. It is only when the young man uses violence that he turns into a Beast. A typical youth, the suitor is both clumsy and rude. He is a young man lost in himself. He still lacks a real male identity, as well as skills, knowledge, male strength and reliability. In the Disney film, the suitor, Gaston, is a disgustingly macho figure who belittles and deprecates women and harasses non-conformists, yet he has his mind set on claiming Belle as his own.

It was actually the actor Jean Marais who inspired Cocteau to make a film of "La Belle et la Bête". Marais wanted to act all three roles himself: the young, insecure and clumsy suitor, the frightening and repulsive Beast, and Prince Charming who has found his sexual identity.

The three faces of a young man: How do these roles fit into the story of a boy's psychosexual development? Who is the dangerous, frightening Beast? Me or you? Is it one's own sexuality that is frightening or is it the sexuality of the other person? Is it male sexuality that frightens the boy or is it male sexuality that frightens the girl? For a boy, the male desire or drive can seem cruel, wild and beastly.

The fight between the Good and the Bad, the tame and the wild is clearly evident in Cocteau's Beast. His Beast is a suffering, desperate monster imprisoned in his bestiality. He looks like a Beast, yet he is no Beast, and he is never even close to being a serious threat to Belle. Cocteau's beast is a fascinating character who is the main figure in the film.

In Disney's film, Belle is the main character and the Beast is frightening and often openly aggressive. Cocteau's Beast is half-man, half-animal, yet totally different from Frankenstein's monster, which I will discuss a bit later.

Does Cocteau use the Beast to show the conflict within us, between the human and the animal parts? As Freud wrote in his essay "*Civilisation and its discontents*" (1930),

"The feeling of happiness from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from sating an instinct that has been tamed" (p. 79). In a cultured civilisation, we believe that desires and drives are animal-like. They are wild and they have to be tamed and controlled. Freud continues: "... what we call our civilisation is largely responsible for our misery, and that we should be much happier if we gave it up and returned to primitive conditions" (p. 86). Freud thus stressed that education and civilisation estrange us from the immediate satisfaction of our drives.

### **The animal within**

We lose something when we perceive ourselves as human beings only. Boys and girls have to integrate and internalise their childhood primal scene fantasies as well as their fantasies about adult sexuality before they are ready to leave adolescence behind, both the fantasies of male sexuality and those of female sexuality. Both can be frightening. Everything the child has imagined about fathers and men as well as about mothers and women is activated when one's own body changes physically, when the young person becomes an adult. These fantasies approach the young person's own identity and self-image, and the Beast fantasy has to be tamed in order for development to take place.

Is this what the fairy tale and the films are about? For a child, carnal desires and drives are dangerous and overwhelming. A child has no real capacity to grasp or understand adult sexuality, which nevertheless evokes a scary fascination. An adolescent has to accept and integrate her

or his own wild bestial qualities before he or she can develop into a psychologically mature man or woman.

The psychoanalyst Ruth Stein has written on sexuality in an interesting way. Stein stresses that it is Otherness that scares us in sexuality, and not only in the sense that the opposite sex is physically different (Stein, 2008). Sexuality is different because it arouses enormously strong, often overwhelming and irresistible thoughts and uniquely intense and sensuous experiences that differ sharply from everyday life, involving thoughts and experiences that concern oneself and another. The Beast represents psychic dangers which during adolescence and young adulthood we need to work through and tame in order to grow into balanced adult human beings.

Belle has to abandon her love for her father. A girl has to discover what sexuality really is: it is neither ugly, dangerous nor frightening when the object of love is known and reliable. This presupposes inner changes: a child loves in a different way from an adult. Both the girl and the boy have to find their way to the Beast. It takes courage to dare to get to know a Beast.

This fairy tale can be understood as a survival story. In the tale, the child matures into an adult. Here we meet characters and situations that we can recognise and identify with and who help us remember basic, existential problems/conflicts.

It was hardly a coincidence that there were homosexual men behind both Cocteau's and Disney's films. In both, the focus can be found on the Beasts as outsiders and the Beasts' experiences of being frightening or threatening to others.

I think it likely that Cocteau and Jean Marais as well as Disney's team chose the story of the Beauty and the Beast for several reasons. The film makers were all openly homosexual men, an orientation for which they were harassed. In the 1940s, tolerance of non-heterosexuals was non-existent compared to many societies today. In the 1990s, fear of AIDS was widespread. It is easy to believe that the goodness of la Bête embodies Cocteau himself. Did Cocteau ask for tolerance with his film? Does he describe himself via the Beast to show how painfully outside society he was and how misunderstood he felt because of his homosexuality? Look at this Beast: he is actually a good human being!

### Rage and really wild things

Homosexuality also created problems in Maurice Sendak's life (1928–2012). The writer never told his parents that he was gay, but that is not the aspect on which I will focus here. I will now turn to a discussion of the well-known writer Maurice Sendak's *Wild Things*. Rather I want to take up another danger that a Beast or monster can represent. Sendak was familiar with psychoanalytic thinking, as he had been in

psychoanalysis as a young man. Moreover his life partner was a psychoanalyst. Yet Sendak rarely made reference to psychoanalysis.

One of his most famous works is the illustrated book from 1963 called *Where the Wild Things Are*. Bruno Bettelheim disapproved of this book because he thought it might scare children! Yet it has been read by millions of young people. The story was innovative because it was about an obnoxious child who yells at his mother and even threatens her. It is also a story about a child who enjoys the fun of being destructive, subjects that previously had seldom been written about. Yet in the wake of this book a film was made based on the story. There has also been an opera composed to its text by Oliver Knussen to a libretto by Maurice Sendak (1963) himself who also designed the production. The opera has repeatedly been staged and performed since 1979.

The original *Where the Wild Things Are* is actually a small picture book with very few words and in which the illustrations are extremely important. In these images, fantasy takes over and in the middle of the book, the reality of words disappears completely. Slowly the words return, and the reader's voice ends the adventure. Sendak has said that he was obsessed by the question of how children survive childhood. For Sendak, childhood was a period of great torment. His empathy is fully with the child, who is at the mercy of the adult. He acknowledges the terrors of childhood, how vicious and lonely this time can be, and through his books he shares how he found consolation through his imagination.

In interviews (Jonze, 2009), Sendak often said that he hated his mother because she was so disturbed and depressed. Sendak also said that he did not create *Where the Wild Things Are* for children, but for himself. The book is his personal story, one in which he managed to create a dense, over determined picture book on a painful personal subject. Sendak chose a very modest form in which to express himself fully. *Where the Wild Things Are* can be read as a story about how, with the help of imagination, a child learns to master his aggression and manage overwhelming feelings of anger and finally finds his way back to an affectionate relationship with his mother.

It is a story of the 4- to 6-year-old Max who has made mischief all day with his mentally unavailable mother until Mom gives up, calling him "Wild thing" and sending him to bed without his supper. In his room, Max's imagination comes to his aid, and he sets out to sail to the place where the wild things are. The wild things are horrifying characters, real monsters with "terrible roars who gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws". Max tames the Wild ones "with the magic trick of staring into

their yellow eyes without blinking once and they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all and made him king of all wild things". This is the crucial moment when the child Max with the help of his imagination tames his own demons, his aggression. Max becomes the king of these ogres and "the wild rumpus starts" until "Max the king of all wild things was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all". He then stops being the king of the monsters and despite their protests returns home where his evening meal waits in his room, still warm. Max has found his way back to his loving mother. Sendak thus shows how Max learns to master his aggression. One could say with Sendak that imagination, dreams and day dreams help children to integrate and handle overwhelming conflicts or emotional outbursts. The most challenging and difficult of all is a feeling of rage at a beloved person, the person on whom the child depends.

### Bad conscience can turn into a monster

I will now briefly introduce a common childhood monster: the monster under the bed. In childhood integration of superego demands create painful inner conflicts. One attempt to solve a superego conflict can be projection of the condemning, threatening part outside. The accusing superego can then be represented by an imagined monster under the bed. Gunilla Bergström (1978) has published a number of excellent picture books about a character called Alfons Åberg. One of these is *Alfons Åberg and the Monster from 1978*.

The story begins with Alfons lying in bed but unable to fall asleep because he is thinking about what happened during the day. He was playing football, and he hit someone smaller than himself. It is spooky in his room; something feels uncanny. Alfons cannot fall asleep, for he is thinking about the boy he hit, a smaller boy, who had been bleeding. Oh, there is a sound, someone growling. Alfons lies totally quiet, listening. Then he understands: THERE IS A MONSTER UNDER HIS BED. A huge wild monster lies beneath his bed, threatening and watching. For a long time Alfons lies awake, listening to the monster and thinking, "Yes, I will be kind to that little boy tomorrow". Alfons sleeps well that night. A week passes in which Alfons cannot find the little boy, and he cannot fall asleep because of the monster under his bed. Alfons has to lie there in the dark thinking about the facts – that he has hit a smaller child and now this little fellow is gone. After a week he spots the small boy and he rejoices. In the evening it takes some time before the monster reappears; there is a strange noise, but it is only his dad in the kitchen. Alfons falls asleep and the monster is gone. Clearly, this monster is Alfons' conscience, which threatens him and creates the symbolic threatening monster under his bed.

### A genuine adult monster

From the fairy tale and children's books, I now want to turn to another kind of monster. Beasts and monsters are created from different unconscious sources. Monsters can be a warning of various inner, psychic dangers. Early traumatic experiences were reality in the life of the creator of *Dr Frankenstein*. It was the masterpiece *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) by the Spanish film director Victor Erice that introduced me to Frankenstein's monster (Figure 2). This film features a little 6-year-old girl Ana, who watches the film *Frankenstein's Monster* in a rural cinema. The film tells how the horror affects her young mind. Erice said in an interview that his first visit to the cinema, when he was Ana's age, made him aware of death, aware of the fact that human beings can die and that human beings can kill (Ehrlich, 2007).

It was the impact of Boris Karloff's clumsy, unfortunate monster that began to fascinate me after seeing Erice's film. What is it about this scary monster that fascinates so many? I turn to Freud's essay *The Uncanny* (1919) for help in understanding my dilemma with this monster. An uncanny feeling is a sense of the strange, the mysterious. Freud wrote: "Uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (p. 220). How can the familiar become uncanny and frightening? Freud plays with the German word *heimlich* which turns into *unheimlich*, meaning uncanny, similar to the Swedish words *hem* and *hemska*, which also have completely opposite meanings.

The creator of Frankenstein and his monster was a 19-year-old girl who spent the cold and rainy summer of 1816 in the extraordinary literary company of her lover Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron and Byron's personal



Figure 2. Illustration from Cook (2004) *A History of Narrative Film*. p. 247 Frankenstein (James Whale, 1931).

physician, Dr John Polidori, on the shores of Lake Geneva. The company entertained themselves by inventing ghost stories.

Some reflections on Mary Shelley's well-documented background (Schor, 2003; Seymor, 2000) are warranted because they are connected to how the Uncanny in Freud's meaning was created. Mary had lost her mother when she was less than 2 weeks old. Years later in 1814, Mary herself lost a baby girl, only 2 weeks old. Mary wrote in her diary that she had dreamt of bringing her baby back to life: "a dream that my little baby came to life again, that it had only been cold, and that we rubbed it before the fire and it lived" (1814).

Mary was haunted by two unconscious fantasies (the kinds that children whose mothers die in childbirth often have): First, the fantasy that she is her mother's murderer and second, that she was abandoned because she was so terrible or alternatively that her mother's death made her terrible. These fantasies were combined in Mary Shelley's psyche with the fresh loss of her own child. These traumatic losses contained all the necessary ingredients for creating the story of Frankenstein's monster. As do many creative artists, Mary Shelley had access to her unconscious. The psychic ingredients for an uncanny monster story are early traumatic loss and the fantasies around that loss. Mary created a monster that is an abandoned, haunted, repulsive being. The monster was an undesired child who turns into a murderer because it has experienced just such early traumas, just as her own motherhood had activated memories of earlier losses, which were then reinforced by Mary's unconscious guilt over her baby's death. Hatred of the mother who abandoned her and concerns about maternal aggression were combined with fear of the mother's retaliation. The story of Dr Frankenstein is one of waking the dead and bringing them back to life and of denying death's omnipotence.

Mary did not find it easy to invent a ghost story, but on the morning of 16 June 1816 she woke from a nightmare and said to her friends, "Now I have a ghost story to share":

I saw a pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life and stir with an uneasy, half vital motion, looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes

(preface to *Frankenstein* 1831 edition).

The moment Frankenstein's "child" is born, Frankenstein rejects him in disgust. Freud states early in his essay on *The Uncanny* (1919): "Many people experience the feeling (Uncanny) in the highest degree in relation to death and to dead bodies, to the return of

the dead and to spirits and ghosts" (p. 241). This is exactly what Shelley used as her material. This dream, which terrified her, became her ghost story. This reparative fantasy of bringing the dead back to life is a central theme. Mary, who had many early losses and concerns about maternal aggressions (her own and her mother's), combined these with unconscious guilt feelings. Inspired by her friends and the German horror stories of the time as well as her own experiences, Mary Shelly created the story of Dr Frankenstein and his monster. She thereby created a new genre: horror stories. As a result of her dream and its impetus for telling a story, Mary published Frankenstein's story in book form some years later (Shelley, 1818). In Mary's circle Dr Polidori in turn invented "Dr Vampyre", a short story published in 1817 about a living dead man.

These two tales, "The Vampyre" and Frankenstein's monster, are icons of horror. Hundreds of films have been made about them. Vampires are especially popular today. The reader can identify with any part of the story.

### Final remarks

It is not only sexuality that challenges our psychic development and balance; aggression and its expressions (or lack of expression) can be just as challenging or demanding. The pain of early loss or later trauma is a threat to mental growth. A monster can also represent or symbolise the consciousness or cracks in the ego-ideal: it can represent a warning like Alfons's monster under his bed at night.

The monster comes from within from the child's inner world, it stems from early experiences that were not possible to integrate or otherwise work through. Instead, these are projected outside so that something in the outside world is experienced as threatening or dangerous. Early traumas or deficient caretaking in the environment or deficient contact between mother and child are experienced as an overwhelming and threatening need by the child and thus have to be expelled and projected outwards.

The fairy tale of "The Beauty and the Beast" is easily interpreted as the story of a young person's development. Sendak and other creative artists have found the means to express inner truth. Sendak had access to his unconscious and could use fantasy to transform an earlier, overwhelming affect. Mary Shelley's monster and her capacity to work creatively with and through her early traumas and losses should be familiar from many psychoanalyses. In psychoanalysis, the analyst's unbiased attitude and empathic capacities lead to reconstruction and understanding of the analysand's often traumatic experiences. The

psychoanalyst helps the analysand find symbols and words for his/her inner experiences. Simplifying the complexity of the human mind, one could say that most of the psychic symptoms that we know today can be seen as related to such developmental deficiencies or traumas. In intensive psychoanalysis, the relationship between the psychoanalyst and the analysand leads in fortunate cases to a healing process.

In so-called normal development, fairy tales and other stories can provide resolutions of psychic conflict by providing symbols for the threatening thing that has happened or could happen – such as when Sendak shows how his art and his imagination can tame aggression.

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