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Here There Be Monsters

Abstract: This chapter positions the Slender Man as a monster character in the genre of horror by contextualizing him through a mix of pre- and post-digital anxieties and cultural connotations: fear of blankness and the uncanny, faceless monsters of pop culture, “men in black,” patriarchal father figures, fairies and child kidnapping creatures, and selfie culture. This chapter also notes that the Slender Man was born in a similar web space and culture as the Occupy social movement and the hacktivist group Anonymous, and identifies the mutual anxieties that spurred the creation of all three.

Keywords: Anonymous; fairies; horror; monsters; Occupy; patriarchal; selfie culture; the uncanny

The stories we tell have meaning. Our human tales represent our dreams, our anxieties, our faults, and our sense of purpose. We tell both fiction and non-fiction stories (and sometimes, tall tales that combine the two) and are drawn to those that resonate with our lives both on personal and cultural levels. Our stories remind us of our humanity and connect us to one another, regardless of the medium through which they are told. Storytelling both makes us human and illuminates those aspects of humanity we admire or revile.

And, yet, not all of our stories are about humans—they feature both the natural and the supernatural. Horror falls into the latter category, as a necessarily fictional form of storytelling that connects us with the unknown. It often functions on a metaphorical and allegorical level—the fears that we see play out in horror stories convey larger anxieties of the unknown, fears of our nature and ourselves, and fears of the Other. Horror’s metaphor affords us the pleasure of seeing these anxieties without having to deal with their implications directly or overtly. Horror’s power exceeds the confines of a single mass medium—popular horror storytelling occurs in novels, film, television, comics, the Internet, and countless other forms.

The Slender Man is no exception. As a horror character, the Slender Man is a reminder of current cultural anxieties in a multitude of ways. In this chapter, we explore the many meanings of the Slender Man, acknowledging and considering a spectrum of possible ways of understanding this new monster of horror. While many of the other horror monsters we encounter—vampires, werewolves, and the undead—are familiar and we see them rise again with each new medium, the Slender Man is unique in that he was born in online spaces. Yet, the Slender Man also has non-digital predecessors. The goal of this chapter is not to define one possible meaning that the Slender Man represents, but rather, to demonstrate the fluidity of this horror character. Many possible complimentary meanings of the Slender Man become apparent when considering the time and space in which he developed. Additionally, the many meanings of the monster help to highlight his instability—as a creature of the Internet he is, by his very nature, constantly changing. By exploring all of these possible meanings we hope to illustrate the power and potential of this horror monster, illustrating how and why the character has achieved popularity so quickly.