

MONSTERS IN STAR TREK -
A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE
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by Miriam Ruff

Much attention has been given to the role of monsters in the Star Trek universe. There have been in-depth analyses of everything from the "classical" monsters - which by nature attack and kill, unable to understand that their actions are wrong, and incapable of being reasoned with - such as the cloud creature in "Obsession" or the flying parasites in "Operation - Annihilate", to the misunderstood aliens like the Horta in "Devil in the Dark". As is generally concluded, these monsters, regardless of their type, added a measure of excitement in the telling of a story, while those that were merely aliens and acting as a result of a definite, understood need, provide a depth through their interactions with the crew and other characters in the show.

Star Trek was, however, in many ways a subtle show, often bringing messages across to its audience through events and character interactions that were only hinted at. It was designed to comment on the human condition, its strengths and weaknesses, its failures and successes. As a result, the use of monsters necessarily reflected that approach; the creatures presented, while visually real and necessary to the overall telling of the story, served to a large extent as a reflection to the true monsters of the show, those that exist within ourselves.

The idea that Star Trek dealt with human flaws is certainly not a new one, but few people recognize these flaws for the monsters that they can be. As Star Trek showed us, even a tiny flaw can assume monstrous proportions given the right conditions. Star Trek was a show about ourselves, our natures, our problems. It is, therefore, our responsibility to attempt to understand and to appreciate the messages inherent in each of the episodes; one of these messages is most definitely the need to recognize and through that recognition conquer the monsters hidden within us, before they can conquer us. The use of external, "visual" monsters was necessary in order to bring those flaws out, to provide a situation where we could see them and take the first, necessary steps towards actively dealing with them.

There are many examples which support this idea, of which I shall discuss only a few. Perhaps one of the strongest of these occurs in "Obsession". A cloud creature, which Kirk had encountered 11 years before, reappears on a planet that the *Enterprise* crew is investigating for a new type of ore. This creature was of the "classical" type, hardly appearing before it attacked and killed several security men without reason other than simple malevolence or survival. Kirk, who blames himself for not killing it 11 years ago and allowing it to decimate the crew of the *U.S.S. Farragut*, becomes obsessed with killing it now, to the point where he puts his command in jeopardy and almost allows himself to destroy the career of Ensign Garrovick, a young officer who reminds him of himself 11 years ago.

Obsession, a single-minded fixation on one idea as Spock has termed it, is one of the strongest of the human monsters. As shown in this episode, it eliminates the capacity for rational thinking and decision making, and if not corrected by some outside or internal force, it will eventually overcome the individual. It is not a side of ourselves that we want to see or to admit to; it is certainly something that Kirk, as a starship captain, does not want to admit that he is capable of. His response to McCoy's assertion that he is, indeed obsessed with the destruction of the creature, is a mixture of both shock and anger.

The situation is alleviated by both internal and external events. Kirk, himself, questions the validity of his decisions, his “right” to pursue the course of action he has chosen based merely “on a memory”; he is forced to acknowledge what harm he may be doing when both Spock and McCoy openly question him on his recent behavior. However, because he is ultimately proven correct in his assessment of the creature, he never does confront his obsession directly, but merely suppresses it for the time being. We see evidence of it again in later episodes, such as “Star Trek - The Motion Picture”, as he attempts to regain the *Enterprise*, careless of anything or anyone he pushes aside in the process.

Star Trek taught by example; Kirk’s failure to come to terms fully with his inner monster gives us our greatest insight into the human character. WE do not want to accept that we, too, are capable of such a flaw; if, by some external process, we are forced to see that darker part of ourselves, we often try to cover it up, to refuse to come to terms with it, so that it surfaces again and again without resolution. It becomes an elusive beast hidden within ourselves.

It is important that there be some external process which releases this monster, at least as far as the series is concerned. Because Kirk is a starship captain and as such always must remain outwardly strong, it would not be believable for him to suddenly become obsessed about something without any apparent cause. As a result, a visible monster is used to create a situation where such a flaw can be brought to the surface, showing us what is hidden within us all.

Another good example of these hidden monsters is found in “Miri”. In this episode there are actually two monsters, the disease that infected both the adults and the children as they entered puberty, and the children themselves.

The first of these, the disease, was a result of life-prolongation experiments conducted by the adults of the planet more than 300 years before. It extended the life span, but only for the children, the adults becoming increasingly violent, eventually going mad, aging incredibly rapidly, and dying. It was a monster of undefined form, something that had to be fought but was incapable of understanding its actions or being reasoned with due to its nature. Interestingly, it had its reflection not in the main characters of the series, but in Miri, one of the children who was with the *Enterprise* crew.

Miri was just entering puberty, and as such she was contracting the disease. She had seen its effects on the others, especially Kirk whom she was attracted to, watching them become increasingly irritable and irrational. Yet she would not accept that such a thing could and would happen to herself. The blotches appeared quickly as the disease was contracted, but not so quickly that she would not have seen them as they appeared on her body. Her response to Kirk's insistence that everyone who went through puberty contracted the disease, though, was vehement denial, an assertion that it only happened “sometimes”. She refused to look at her arm where the blotches were spreading, refused to accept what was happening to her. Kirk has to physically force her to look, to confront the truth, to confront reality.

This monster, the refusal to accept something that we know to be true but is painful for us, is almost as strong, and perhaps more prevalent, than obsession. As Spock has said on occasion, humans do have a capacity to believe what they choose. It is something we rationalize as being necessary to protect our sanity; but it is ultimately defeating. By blocking out the reality of a situation, we eliminate any possibility of dealing with it, rationally, and eventually even irrationally. The situation will deteriorate until it can destroy us. By refusing to accept that she, too, was becoming one of the “creatures” that she feared, Miri would have let the disease progress in its course until she was dead. It was only after she had been forced to come to terms

with it that she took steps to control the situation, by bringing Kirk to the “onlies” so that he could retrieve their communicators and contact the ship.

As with “Obsession,” we have a visible monster that has to be fought and overcome, but ultimately the key to that struggle lies in the fight against the internal monsters that surface because of it. Only after we have come to terms with ourselves can we come to terms with the external threat; our internal struggle, our fight for survival against our own weaknesses, gives us the strength and ability to carry on the struggle for our survival against this external force. Unknowingly, the creature provides us with an opportunity to use for its own destruction, but this can only be true if we recognize the opportunity as such and realize that if we fail to deal with the situation it can become a means of self-destruction, as both monsters will be able to destroy us.

The second monster in “Miri” is not immediately recognizable as such, the children. Children are supposed to be the “innocents” in any situation, lacking the experience and knowledge of adults. Yet these children were 300 years old. They had seen the “grups” hurting and killing in the “before time.” They had seen many of the people they had known turn into the “creatures” that they feared. They had become cruel and unfeeling themselves; one of the most frightening scenes in the entire series is when Kirk is being beaten by the children, and the camera closes in on a little girl, a cold smile of amusement on her face as she watches the scene.

The children were not aware that they were being violent until they were explicitly shown. They were not aware that they were behaving in much the same way as the “grups” that they remembered; to them it was all a part of another “foolie”. We, too, do not like to acknowledge that we are capable of such violence and we are often not even aware of it. It is something that goes against everything that we strive for in a peaceful society. Nevertheless, that tendency is there. As with the children, we can overcome it. In order to master it - as with all our other flaws - we must acknowledge its presence and take active means to suppress it.

It is very rare that someone will be able to recognize one of his monsters on his own without any outside provocation, and as a result conquer it; therefore, there must be some “trigger” to show it to us. Through the use of a visual monster, even one that has little resemblance to the one that is being presented, such a situation can be created. The monster's presence forces a reaction in the individual, bringing hidden traits to the surface as we search for some means of fighting it. Even so subtle a monster as the children serves as a reflection to our inner selves; it is a measure of the excellence of Star Trek that these “mirrors” could be so effective in making us see what would be easier or more comfortable, but ultimately more disastrous, not to.

A third example of the external/internal monsters is found in “The Trouble With Tribbles”. This is probably one of the least recognized examples of this relationship, and therefore it brings out one of the most dangerous of our hidden beasts. Cyrano Jones, a trader in rare merchandise, appears at the K-7 space station where the *Enterprise* is responding to a distress call. In a short time he has sold Lt. Uhura a tribble, which she proceeds to bring up to the ship to keep as a pet. These tribbles breed prolifically, soon overrunning the ship and eating everything in sight. Spock realizes the danger in these creatures, but when he comments that the tribbles are consuming all their supplies and returning nothing, Uhura protests that “They do give us something, Mr. Spock, they give us love. Why Cyrano Jones says that tribbles are the only love that money can buy.”

This statement reveals the full monstrosity of the flaw, the inability to recognize that something can be a major threat when it is cute. It is a monster in the sense that it blinds us to

the reality of the situation, and delays our action until it can be too late. Most of the *Enterprise* crew felt that the tribbles were cute and “loveable,” and even though they were a nuisance, they just would have to be tolerated. But if the situation had gone on much longer, the tribbles would not only have eaten everything edible aboard the ship, but because they had also gotten into the machinery, they would probably have caused a great deal of crucial operating mechanisms to break down, perhaps to the point that the crew would have had to abandon ship. Although the tribbles would have eventually died from the lack of food, their bodies would still have clogged the machines, causing damage to the systems.

We tend to recognize a threat only when it “looks” like a threat; if it looks cute and furry and harmless, we tend to think of it as cute and furry and harmless. It is not so much a refusal to accept reality because it is painful, as with the disease in “Miri”, as it is an unsubstantiated feeling that an appearance must be indicative of character. But appearances can be most deceiving. As Spock told McCoy in “The Empath,” “The sand bats of Mynark 4 appear to be inanimate rock crystals, until they attack.” So, too, while the tribbles appeared to be not much more than little balls of fluff which made pleasant trilling noises, they were in effect parasites, preying on anything that would support them.

Unlike the other external/internal reflections, the internal monster in this episode was one that was a direct response to the nature of the external monster. It is a vague, undefined monster, acting to obscure our judgment and deter us from taking action to correct the situation. In its own way it can be as devastating as obsession. It prevents us from approaching the situation rationally, making us wait until we feel the creature’s bite before we decide that maybe our first impression was not, after all, correct. But by the time that we feel that bite, it may be too late; if they had waited any longer in “Tribbles” before taking action, the creatures would have so overrun the ship that the crew would have been powerless to prevent it.

“The Doomsday Machine” provides another example of this relationship. Here, the external monster was the doomsday device, an automated machine of immense power that destroyed planets and digested the rubble for fuel. It was left over from a war somewhere outside of our galaxy, used by a people long ago destroyed by their own weapon.

It was, again, more of the “classical” type of monster, impossible to reason with, attacking and killing without comprehension because that was its very nature. Nevertheless, its interaction with the characters of the episode demonstrated another powerful, internal monster, one almost as powerful as obsession: guilt. Commodore Matt Decker, the captain of the *U.S.S. Constellation*, sent his crew down to the fourth planet in the L-374 system when it became obvious that they could no longer fight the doomsday machine. But the machine attacked the ship again, damaging the transporter; when his crew called up begging for help as the device began to destroy the planet, Decker could do nothing to help them. His entire crew was destroyed because of his error in judgment.

Instead of helping the *Enterprise* crew do the only logical thing possible, warning Starfleet about the presence of the machine, Decker allowed the guilt he felt over the destruction of his crew and his ship to drive him, taking over command of the *Enterprise* and insisting that they attack and destroy the machine, even when Spock had repeatedly told him that it was impossible for one ship to accomplish that.

Guilt, like obsession, can eliminate the capacity for rational thinking; this is only reasonable as it is itself a form of obsession, driving a person towards a specific goal, irrespective of anything else around. Unless a means can be found for releasing it, it will ultimately destroy the person.

Few people, though, see it as a form of obsession, and therein lies its monstrosity. Unlike many of the other monsters we keep hidden, guilt is something we will often acknowledge. We blame ourselves for things that happen, whether they are within our control or not, seeing in this a means of alleviating the situation. In reality, though, it only serves to make the situation worse. It does nothing to alter what has happened, but merely drives us until we become so obsessed with what has already happened that we lose our capacity to deal rationally with any situation.

Decker could not deal with his guilt and eventually killed himself because of it, flying the shuttlecraft into the doomsday machine in a last attempt to stop it. It is in Decker's failure to conquer his guilt that we see the terrible power of this monster. It is a part of ourselves which we will acknowledge but will not recognize its ability to destroy. We would like to think that we will never let it reach that far, that we will have the strength to destroy it before it can do any harm. But it is the nature of a true monster to be just that, a monster. It will do everything in its power to destroy. The best defense that we can take against it is to recognize it, because through the recognition of our fallibility, through the admission that we are not perfect, we can also find our inner strengths and in turn use these to defeat it.

That was one of the main purposes of Star Trek's monsters, to make us recognize our weaknesses so that from them we could see our strengths. Through the interactions of the characters with these creatures we could see aspects of ourselves that we might not otherwise see. And this is one of the things that distinguishes Star Trek from most other science-fiction shows; it had the ability to make us think, to show us subtly but convincingly what we are afraid to see. Star Trek made us question who and what we are. And after all, wasn't that what the show was all about?