Hungarian Studies 38 (2024) 1, 63–72
DOI: 10.1556/044.2024.00271

AKADÉMIAI KIADÓ

A European getaway for female monsters
Representations of cultural alienation in the novels of Theodora Goss

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Received: April 17, 2024 • Accepted: July 5, 2024
Published online: March 7, 2025

ABSTRACT

In my study, I explore representations of otherness and alienation in the Athena Club trilogy by Theodora Goss, a Hungarian-born writer currently living and working in the United States. In the first part of the analysis, I focus on the relationship between female identity and monstrosity. I argue that monstrosity in Goss' novels can be seen in the deconstruction of traditional nineteenth-century female roles. Hence, the female monsters of the Athena Club can be interpreted as a metaphor for self-realization and a representation of otherness. In the second part of the analysis, I will examine the experience of alienation from the perspective of the protagonist (Mary), along the opposition of home and abroad. I will point out that the experience of the new cultural environment, and more specifically the positive experience with Hungarian cultural realities, means the final elimination of the experience of alienation.

KEYWORDS

traditional female role, monstrosity, ethnic stereotypes, alienation, Hungarian cultural realities

INTRODUCTION

"I started writing a book about monsters because my family had emigrated from Hungary to the United States when I was a child. I was fascinated by monsters because they are cultural

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outsiders, and I was one myself."[1] (Goss, 2020, p. 499) In her afterword to the first part of the Athena Club trilogy, Theodora Goss, in addition to defining the genesis of the work as a condition of adaptation to a new cultural environment, also refers to the monsters in her novels as embodiments of cultural alienation and otherness. This is also referred to by Asa Mittman, who argues that monster theories allow us to understand and describe the means people use for oppression, rejection, and exclusion (Mittman, 2016, p. 8). Monsters, as cultural (human) products, by their very nature evoke a categorical crisis, and are therefore capable of representing aspects of the experience of alienation in both concrete and figurative terms. At the same time, monsters are so culturally diverse that it is difficult to condense them into a single definition, and, self-contradictorily, their indefinability becomes their most universal characteristic. The situation is further complicated by the fact that monsters are not only present in adult literature and film, but also in works that appeal to readers and viewers of all ages. For this reason, the theoretical part of the study has a dual objective. On the one hand, it takes a cultural-theoretical approach (Jeffrey Jerome Cohen) to the morphological characteristics of monsters (Noel Carroll), their role in narratives (Tudor Andrew), and the mixed aesthetic effects they have on their recipients (Noel Carroll, Asa Mittman). On the other hand, since Theodora Goss' novels are works of youth literature, it is also necessary to outline the trends in the representation of monsters within children's and youth culture. Accordingly, in the first part of the analysis, I approach the idea of monstrousness from the perspective of social constructions. I will argue that in Theodora Goss' novels, the existence of monsters can be seen in the deconstruction of traditional nineteenth-century female roles. In the second part of the analysis, I examine the representations of the experience of foreignness along the opposition of home and abroad, in terms of material and spiritual cultural realities, with special attention to Hungarian ethnic stereotypes. By eliminating ethnic stereotypes, I consider the experience and appreciation of the values of a new cultural environment as a sign of adaptation.

MONSTERS IN (YOUTH) LITERATURE

Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, in his study of the history of the development of monster theories, points out that the study of monsters is characterized by interdisciplinary openness. In particular, Weinstock highlights three disciplines – teratology, mythology and psychology – that make different features of monstrosity the object of their study. From the point of view of teratology and mythology, birth defects resulting in physical monstrosity and the physical characteristics of various fantastic creatures are considered the main research aspects. Whereas, from a psychoanalytic approach, the most noteworthy aspects are the circumstances under which and the reasons why "man" starts behaving in a non-human way (Weinstock, 2020, p. 4).

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's essay, *Seven Theses*, is of great importance to monster theorists. Cohen considers monsters as cultural categories, thus linking the aspects of the aforementioned scientific disciplines, and formulates the essential aspects to be applied in the analysis of monsters in a cultural theoretical context. In his first thesis, Cohen explains that the body of the monster is a "cultural body", that is, it is distinctively a human product, and therefore

[1]The author has written a separate afterword for the Hungarian edition of the first part of the trilogy (*The Strange Case of the Alchemist's Daughter*). The translation is based on the edition listed in the bibliography.

the monster is always "an embodiment of a certain cultural moment" (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). Cohen is suggesting here that the meaning of monsters and the criteria of monstrousness (bodily characteristics) vary from culture to culture. For this reason, the interpretation of monsters is always relative, they can be interpreted in many different ways. As defined by Judith Halberstam, monsters are meaning machines, and "they can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body" (Halberstam, 1995, pp. 21–22).

According to Cohen's third thesis, the general characteristic of monsters is their ontological liminality, that is, their rejection of any form of categorization (Cohen, 1996, pp. 6–7), and it is this categorical crisis that makes it difficult to define them precisely. Because monsters, says David Gilmore, "do not fit into the mental scheme people rely on to explain the world" (Gilmore, 2006, p. 19), and "they offer a threat to the culture's very integrity as an intellectual whole" (Gilmore, 2006, p. 19). The representational strategies that monsters use to evoke a categorical crisis will be discussed in more detail along three perspectives: narrative, bodily representation, and aesthetic effects.

In his monograph, Tudor Andrew sees monsters as a constant narrative element in horror. According to Tudor, horror is one of those genres that directly embody the sequential triad of order–disorder–order, where the state of disorder is virtually always identified with the appearance of a monster that enters an everyday world and goes on a rampage. On the basis of the opposition of order and disorder, we can of course define further pairs of opposites (e.g. known – unknown, life – death, natural – supernatural, good – evil, etc.). Tudor adds that, as the narrative unfolds, the categories of the known and the unknown are usually linked to a certain moral order, which has a stable and clear relationship with the basic structure of the genre (Tudor, 1989, pp. 82–83).

Monsters are also of significant importance in Noël Carroll's much-cited work, *The Philosophy of Horror*. Carroll approaches the genre of horror from a cognitive point of view, and sees monsters as an essential, integral element of horror. In the first chapter of his monograph, the author presents his typology of monsters, which is based on the unnatural interpenetration between the aforementioned categories, and on transgression. Carroll's most important monster types are created by the fusion of incompatible categories (living and dead, human and non-human, external and internal) and fission based on the disruption of the space-time continuum (Carroll, 1990, pp. 43–48). In addition to the representational strategy typical of monsters, Carroll also points out that monsters are not only contradictory in their embodiment, but also cognitively threatening, so that they inherently evoke mixed aesthetic effects in the recipient. In this respect, Asa Mittman's argument is also worth paying attention to. According to Mittman, it is impossible to define monsters by their physical characteristics only, as the criteria for monstrosity vary from culture to culture. Thus, he suggests that it is more appropriate to define monstrosity in terms of the aesthetic effects that monsters evoke (Mittman, 2016, pp. 7–8). However, Mittman and Carroll's insights into the emotions evoked in recipients do not take into account the monsters we find in youth literature.

As several analyses have pointed out, the function of monsters in children's culture is fundamentally changed, from antagonist to protagonist, with whom the audience of children takes solidarity. For example, Rebecca Brown notes, in the context of narrative picture books, that the most frightening physical features of monsters become domesticated: "With notable exceptions, the artists bestow their creations with rounded bodies, curious eyes, and fewer pointy edges than their filmic and literary counterparts." (Brown, 2016, p. 91) Brown's analysis points

to the fact that the characters in contemporary picture books have a more complex social and gender identity as a result of the monster–human opposition (Brown, 2016, p. 91), monsters thus encourage child readers to accept them and look for similar traits in themselves. Ultimately, monsters can be interpreted as discursive elements of identity construction: they successfully ground and support the development of social and gender identities determined by cultural context.

Peter Kunze also comes to similar conclusions in his analysis of two contemporary cartoons that target both children and adults. The monsters in the animated movies *Monsters, Inc.* and *Shrek* are typically funny and human-like in many ways, challenging the narrative conventions of adult horror, where the focus shifts from the violent destruction of monsters to the acceptance of otherness and alienation: "The emended status quo proposes a better world for monsters and children alike founded on a symbiotic relationship, while suggesting to the child viewer the benefits of confronting the Other, not to destroy it, but to appreciate it and work toward mutual understanding." (Kunze, 2016, p. 161)

Emily Hiltz's analysis highlights how the mutant monsters in Collins's trilogy can be interpreted along volatile boundaries. She points out that the monsters are not only instruments of the Capitol's exercise of power, but also symbolize the political resistance of the rebels. On the other hand, at one point in her analysis, she pictures the protagonists themselves (Kattniss and Peeta) in liminal situations as monsters who, in certain aspects, become monsters in the service of the greater good, this way "Collins's novels provoke the horrific realization that monsters are sometimes made in the process of doing good" (Hiltz, 2016, p. 217). The monsters in *The Hunger Games* trilogy thus function as a multi-layered metaphorical web. For the teenage readers, this ambiguity becomes relevant above all through reconsidering their own values.

The purpose of monsters in youth culture therefore changes fundamentally from antagonist to protagonist, with whom the child audience takes solidarity, thus creating the figure of the "empathic monster". Instead of the negative emotions evoked in the recipients, social constructions, the identity crisis of the young protagonists, the internal dynamics of teenage groups and the relationship between the members become more significant.

THE NATURE AND STAKES OF MONSTROSITY

Theodora Goss' novels are created through a process of crossover textualization, based on the selection and regrouping of characters from already known fictional worlds (Benyovszky, 2016, p. 389). The representation of characters in the same textual space often results in genre contamination (Benyovszky, 2016, p. 393), so the *Athena Club* trilogy is also built from the constitutive elements of two popular genres, crime fiction and horror. The novels feature female characters from nineteenth-century monster fiction investigating a secret scientific society with the help of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson. And so, in the second part of the trilogy, the members of the Athena Club are forced to travel across Europe to Budapest to persuade the Alchemical Society, which is meeting there, to convince them to stop transmutation experiments on humans.

The members of the Athena Club are characterized by a conscious rejection of traditional nineteenth-century female roles. The girls reject the material attributes typically associated with the traditional female role, such as clothing. The figure of Diana Hyde is representative in this

respect. Diana consistently rejects contemporary female attire (hat, skirt, corset, underwear) on the grounds that it is impractical for everyday life (Goss, 2019, p. 578), and so she prefers to dress like a boy. In France, for example, the shop assistant identifies Diana as a boy: "You want a girl dress for the little boy? –she said, surprised." (Goss, 2019, p. 106) Like Diana, Justine Frankenstein disguises her female identity by travelling to Budapest as a man to avoid attracting attention on the Orient Express. The male disguise manifests itself not only in the way she dresses, but also in the way she behaves: "Mary had to admit that Justine played a man to perfection, pulling out chairs for her and Diana, taking Justine's hat off at exactly right times and in the right places." (Goss, 2019, p. 114) A polar opposite of the above is Mrs. Poole, the housekeeper of the Athena Club, who, as if to represent conservative society, reminds Mary and the girls from time to time that their behavior is unladylike. It should be pointed out here that "lady" is both a symbol of female identity and of social class, that is to say, the everyday activities typical of the middle classes (tea, social chatter) are provided by Mrs. Poole, but as we have seen, the girls eradicate their female identity. However, if we take a closer look at the relationship between society and the members of the Athena Club, it becomes clear that female identity and monstrosity are more closely linked than they seem.

The monsters in the novels all have in common that they are the result of some kind of scientific experiment. Taking into account the methods used to create the monsters, we can distinguish two groups. The first includes Catherine Moreau and Justine Frankenstein, who are surgically incarnated. Catherine Moreau is a hybrid creature (human-animal) transformed from a cougar into a human, Justine Frankenstein is a recreated, animated model (living-dead) of the maid Justine Moritz. Thus, in the case of Catherine and Justine, the identity of the monster is created along the transgression of the categories of human – animal and living – dead. In the second group, the physiological deformation is caused by chemical experiments. Beatrice Rappacini's body constantly emits poison (poisonous – healing), while Diana Hyde and Mary Jekyll (conscious self – subconscious self), true to the doppelganger motif of the premise, carry the personality traits of their father. In all three parts of the trilogy, it is observed that the ladies typically self-identify as monsters, which is foreshadowed by the mottos "Here be monsters"; "For all the girl monsters. May they conquer the world.", since we know that as part of the fictional world, Catherine is the author of the novels. The helpers and people in the immediate proximity of the Athena Club, such as Sherlock and Watson, are aware of the ladies' monster identities, but they very politely treat them as ladies at all times, in accordance with the etiquette of the time. Perhaps the most absurd sequence of events in the first part of the trilogy is when Justine Frankenstein kills an animal-human creature like Catherine to defend the others. Sherlock and Watson help the girls hide the body, arguing that the police would never believe such mutants ("animal-humans") existed anyway, and that a possible investigation would attract the attention of the Alchemical Society. Soon after the body is hidden, Sherlock, Watson and the others learn the story of Justine Frankenstein, where Justine recounts all the trials and losses she has suffered. Justine's tale also reveals that her dead body conceals a fragile soul, burdened by loneliness and guilt. The origin story thus has a moral mitigating function, giving Justine moral absolution from the point of view of Sherlock, Watson and the readers. Narrative empathy works in a similar way in Catherine's case. On one occasion Catherine accuses another member of the circus, Zora, of stealing, who is rather offended by this accusation, but when she learns of Catherine's origin story (Moreau's Island), she forgives Catherine (Goss, 2019, p. 388).

Mary brings together the members of what later becomes the Athena Club while solving murders in London. She meets Diana for the first time at the prison-like Magdalene Society, where Diana is unable to exercise her monstrous abilities (opening locks, climbing walls). Beatrice is shown off as the first of a new species by her captor, Professor Petronius. During her performance, Beatrice destroys various fruits and kills animals with her poisonous breath. Justine and Catherine travel together with a circus troupe, where Catherine "plays" a catwoman and Justine a giantess.

The examples just mentioned show that the ladies – at least in the latter two cases – are in a milieu where they can reveal their monstrousness to the public in such a way as to arouse not fear and disgust, but admiration and fascination in the visitors. The charm and attractiveness of monstrosity can also be seen in the girls' private lives. Most notably, perhaps, in the case of Beatrice, who becomes of interest to Clearence when he learns that she is poisonous (Goss, 2019, p. 345). Diana Hyde and Catherine Moreau also charm Charlie Sutton, the London ragamuffin, with their monstrosity. He sees Diana Hyde as "his goddess of thievery and mischief" (Goss, 2019, p. 66), while Catherine catches his attention with her huge front teeth (Goss, 2019, p. 45). Hence, it is the girls' monster identity that makes them attractive.

The merging of feminine and monstrous identities is also evident at the linguistic-lexical level of the novel. As we approach the second part of the trilogy, when Mary and her companions hold a meeting where Mary thinks they should offer Lucinda to join the Athena Club, we read the following: "We've never decided on a criterion for membership – we've never had to. But I think she meets it. I mean, she's like us – *'A monster,'* said Catherina. – *a young woman* affected by experiments of various sorts, said Mary pointedly" (Goss, 2019, p. 676). Catherine interrupts Mary, so that the concepts of the monster and the young woman are effectively interchangeable, and monstrosity can be interpreted as a metaphor for self-realization. This is also confirmed by the fact that the members of the Athena Club create the financial resources necessary for their own livelihood. Beatrice grows herbs, Mary gets a job as Sherlock Holmes' assistant, Justine paints pictures, while Catherine writes short stories and articles.

In Theodora Goss' novels monstrosity is not a matter of bodily characteristics or negative aesthetic effects on the recipient, but rather of the deconstruction of traditional nineteenth-century female roles.

OVERCOMING (HUNGARIAN) CULTURAL FOREIGNNESS

The diversity is not only reflected in the categories of monsters, but also in their origins. Justine was born in France, Catherine is from the South American wilderness, Diana and Mary are from London, and Beatrice was born in Padua, Italy. So most of the Athena Club members had been abroad, but finally found a home in London, at 11 Park Terrace. This, and the importance of the chronotope of travel is the reason why we can find German, French, Italian, Dutch and Hungarian expressions in the novel.

But Mary has spent her whole life in London, so the transcultural experience from her perspective becomes of paramount importance: "But ever since coming abroad, she had felt discombobulated, as though she were still on that ferry, bobbing up and down on the ocean waves." (Goss, 2019, p. 187) Mary has similar experiences later in life, but by this time it seems as if her whole personality and identity is being questioned: "She had always known what to do,

always been so sure of herself. She had been Miss Mary Jekyll of 11 Park Terrace. Who was she now, in the house that was not hers, in a foreign country? What was happening to her?" (Goss, 2019, p. 201)

In connection with this quote, it is worth referring to the epilogue of the first part, in which the author recounts very similar childhood experiences, only for her, as a Hungarian, the new American environment represented a disturbing strangeness. The authorial experience is therefore the opposite of the character's quoted experience: "I started writing a book about monsters because my family had emigrated from Hungary to the United States when I was a child (…) It was not easy to adapt to a new country with unfamiliar traditions, and like so many shy children, I sought refuge in books." (Goss, 2020, p. 499) This is how she discovered the classics of gothic-fantasy literature, in which she uncovered a world full of magic familiar from Hungarian folk tales (Goss, 2020, p. 500), and strange creatures that she felt close to despite their frightening or repulsive nature: "I was fascinated by monsters because they are cultural outsiders, and I was one myself." (Goss, 2020, p. 500) That's why she wrote that her favorite novel about female monsters "would not have been written if she hadn't felt a little bit like a monster once, a long time ago" (Goss, 2020, p. 501).

Therefore, it seems appropriate to further examine the representations of the experience of foreignness in terms of the opposition between home and abroad, and in terms of material and spiritual cultural realities, focusing on the Hungarian aspects and Mary's perspective.

Mary is compulsively searching for English cultural realities during her travels. On the Orient Express, she declares, "it might be hard to find good English tea where she was going" (Goss, 2019, p. 146). Later, when she is at Carmilla's castle, Mary is overcome by homesickness as she is sipping on some excellent English tea: "… but the tea, strong and hot, took Mary right back to the parlor at 11 Park Terrace. It was Mrs. Poole's favorite Yorkshire blend. She felt terribly homesick." (Goss, 2019, p. 108) English tastes and the cultural interactions that characterize the English society give Mary a momentary pleasure, despite the fact that the attachment to the familiar flavors is clearly associated with negative emotions and homesickness. But while staying abroad, Mary also faces a sense of discomfort due to her cultural homogeneity. While travelling in Vienna, she realizes that a high level of proficiency in English is part of the general education in Central Europe. Although the fact that Europeans speak English well helps Mary to adapt to a foreign cultural environment, she considers herself uneducated: "How was it that everyone on the continent could speak excellent English, while she could speak nothing else?" (Goss, 2019, p. 298)

The novel refers several times to the fact that the Hungarian language differs from other European languages in many ways. Irene Norton, for example, defines it as "a completely impossible language" (Goss, 2019, p. 335), while Mary, listening to Hungarian discourse, "could not quite tell which were words and which were names in Hungarian" (Goss, 2019, p. 581). In the English text, there are several Hungarian expressions which appear in italicized form, so their foreignness is indicated. These expressions can be divided into two groups in terms of translation and interpretation. The first category includes those Hungarian words that appear with their English equivalents: "Only, he says it will help my mother – édesanyám." (Goss, 2019, p. 436). However, there are also cases where Hungarian words, phrases and sentences appear in the English text without translation or paraphrasing to explain their meaning. For example, Mina Murray, who speaks Hungarian well, engages in conversation with a gypsy woman: "Jó napot, Mária Petrescu. Hogy van ma?" {"Good afternoon, Maria Petrescu. How are you today?"}

(Goss, 2019, p. 584). Or when Ágnes, who is a native Hungarian speaker, runs into the room at the sound of a gunshot: "János! Jézus Mária, mi történt?" – it was Ágnes at the door {"János! My God, what happened?"} (Goss, 2019, p. 455). The latter function primarily as signs of the current linguistic environment (reminding the reader of the nationality of the characters), and thus Hungarian expressions function as exoticizing effects. In rare cases, however, there is a mixing of Hungarian and English within a single utterance, which has a humorous effect. This is the case in the following dialogue between Ágnes and Mr. Hyde: "Ágnes, can you fry up some eggs, and maybe some tomatoes? Tojás és … I don't remember the word for tomatoes. You know, red gyümölcs." He cupped his hands, as though holding a ball. "Paradicsom," said Ágnes (Goss, 2019, p. 413).

In terms of ethnic stereotypes, negative generalizations about Hungarians deserve special attention. Sherlock once describes Hungary in this manner: "A strange little country, very proud, with a language that is almost impossible to learn. There, some would tell you, is the edge of civilized Europe!" (Goss, 2019, p. 85) Sherlock's description of the East as uncivilized is initially confirmed, and presumably influences Mary's opinion. When Mary sees Ágnes, a waitress dressed in traditional costume, she finds her distinctly peasant-like: "In walked a girl, about Diana's age, wearing an embroidered cap and apron – probably a servant, but in a distinctively rural style, completely different from Hannah's smart sophistication." (Goss, 2019, p. 410) Perhaps the most drastic example of the underdeveloped Eastern European image is when Catherine is not sure if there are cabs in contemporary Budapest: "Catherine assumed there would be cabs in Budapest, just as there were in London and Paris, and Vienna. It was a civilized city, wasn't it?" (Goss, 2019, p. 509)

However, these assumptions are not confirmed in Hungary, as even the suburbs of Budapest impress Mary with their diversity: "They did not look like the gray buildings of London, or even the brighter ones of Vienna, but were painted in various colors – pale yellow, sage green, a sort of burnt sienna, sky blue." (Goss, 2019, p. 506) The difference between Budapest and London is also reflected in the text at a motivic level. Although the Danube and the Thames are similar at first glance, it is striking that the Danube is an active waterway, and that the river in Budapest is much cleaner than the Thames (Goss, 2019, p. 524). During their stay in Budapest, the members of the Athena Club are also introduced to technical advances not yet used in the UK. This is the first time the girls travel by automobile (Goss, 2019, p. 499) and the first time they see a tram (Goss, 2019, p. 598). But it is not just the advanced public transport system that surprises them, but also the city center, the café culture and the modernity and facilities of the department stores. For example, we read that Mary, standing in front of the mirror in the dress Laura gave her, was surprised to see that "it was the most fashionable outfit she has ever worn" (Goss, 2019, p. 498). The reaction of the girls when they experience the monumental style of the New York Café is also very telling: "Oh. My. Word. What is this, some sort of temple of coffee?" (Goss, 2019, p. 599) The gastronomic motifs are also a sign of the final eradication of ethnic stereotypes and alienation. At the beginning of the journey, Mary is reluctant to drink coffee: "Mary would stick to her tea, thank you very much!" (Goss, 2019, p. 256), we read in her inner monologue. On one occasion, the girls are enjoying Hungarian desserts (Dobos cake, Esterházy cake, Gerbeaud slice, Rigó Jancsi cake) in a pastry shop in Pest, accompanied by coffee: "By the time they were finished – plates scattered with crumbs, coffee cups empty – Mary was completely full and a great deal happier than she had been for a long time. Was it the chocolate, or sitting here, in a café in Budapest, with just Justine and Diana – and with Mina?" (Goss, 2019, 583)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the strategies of representation of monsters in Theodora Goss' Athena Club trilogy are in line with trends in contemporary children's and youth literature. If we look at the Athena Club as a dynamically functioning social group, the contours of monstrosity are drawn along the lines of the deconstruction of traditional nineteenth-century female roles. The members of the Athena Club are at odds with the social norms of the time, and thus symbolize otherness by being outsiders. In the case of the protagonist, the experience of alienation is interpreted in terms of the duality of fear of an unfamiliar cultural environment and a compulsive attachment to home. Cultural homogeneity exacerbates the negative emotions resulting from the experience of alienation. However, due to the introduction to the new cultural environment and positive experiences with Hungarian cultural realities, these feelings gradually subside and the initial resistance formed by negative ethnic stereotypes is replaced by acceptance. These examples demonstrate that Hungarian expressions in the second part of the trilogy are mostly linguistic signals of the foreign cultural context, but sometimes they also function as a source of comedy (language mixing, code-switching). The above analysis has only dealt with one aspect of monstrousness in the novel. Another promising line of research seems to be a closer, semiotic examination of the cultural meanings of certain categories of monsters ("living–dead", "human–animal") and food.

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