

# Monsters in Disappearing Rain: A Digital Insight (Analysis)

Khadijah Waheed<sup>1</sup>, Sidra Ahmad<sup>2</sup>, Mehwish Zaidi<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Visiting Lecturer (English), Foundation School of Science and Technology, Foundation University Islamabad.

<sup>2</sup>Lecturer, Department of English, Foundation School of Science and Technology, Foundation University Islamabad.

<sup>3</sup>PhD Scholar (English), Foundation University of Science and Technology, Foundation University Islamabad.

Correspondence: [sidra.ahmad@fui.edu.pk](mailto:sidra.ahmad@fui.edu.pk)<sup>2</sup>

## ABSTRACT

**Aim of the Study:** With its theoretical underpinnings in Jeffrey J. Cohen's seminal works in monster studies the study is an attempt to extend the notion of monster in the di-gi-modern world and present the study that the digital world is also a monster.

**Methodology:** The study uses Catherine Belsey's model of textual analysis to analyze the monstrosity in Larsen's *Disappearing Rain* (2000).

**Findings:** The key findings of the study are that the digital world is a monster in that it is a cultural construct, evades capture and is policing the border besides carrying a fascination for the abomination.

**Conclusion:** The study's contribution is more than this new interpretation of the colour, imagery, plot and the overall effect of a digital text as the monster, it also asserts that the digital text is monstrous in the sense that it enables monsters, turns ordinary persons into monsters capable of the most gruesome acts of violence through immersive experience and scary visuals.

**Keywords:** Monster, Digital Literature, Digi-modern World, Violence, Immersive Experience.

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## Introduction

The advancement in technology is making the use of social media and gadgets more handy than books. Instead of laboring through pages of a gothic novel, the audience prefers to watch it on screen to feel the pleasure of audiovisual aid, the audience could now see what the ghost looks like instead of just imagining it. The step of just watching it has now changed itself completely to experiencing it. In digital literature the role of reader is now more than that of an author, he has an immersive experience as he flickers through the digital text.

Digital Literature is a form of literature that is born in the digital world. It contains all the literature born in the digital medium (Simone Murray). It facilitates the reader with online reading material like blogs. The reader does not turn pages to get to the plot; instead, he clicks and scrolls to decipher meaning through the text. In digitally born literature the reader becomes a partial author and he decides how to make meaning through various hypertexts (Pressman,2023). The electronic literature has simulation,

amplification and immersion while going through the text which makes the text alive through audio-visual aids and produces a passive reader.

The immersive experience of the reader through multimodality leads to the complete indulgence of the reader to an extent that he feels himself as a part of the story (Simon Rowborry). This experience can be comic, serious, or mischievous depending upon the plot of the story. If the story leads to a haunted house or a dead man it makes the reader scared and he seeks pleasure in that feeling of exploring the unknown-a monster (Cohen, 2000).

Every critic defines monsters in different ways depending upon their features. They are categorized in accordance with as to how they appear or how they act. These characteristics vary as for some monster refers to the "strong, sly creature, referring to the display of blood or performing impossible feats" (Sibylle Erle) on the other hand for others being huge, having malevolent maws, large bodies and exaggerated features is monstrous (Gilmore, 174).

Another fundamental feature of a monster by Carpi highlights the fact that monsters eat a lot i.e. the consumption of food by monsters is in bulk. Therefore monsters are attached to the gobblers who eat in bulk and consume everything in excess. Gilmore relates these features to the cannibalistic qualities of monsters as they are the "man eaters" (Gilmore, 180).

The concept of cannibalism and man eating qualities are also elaborated as uncanny by Freud. He describes how someone reaches to this stage by passing three other stages: "oral aggressive stage, primary to the anal, phallic and genital sequence". Melvin also seconds Freud's view of the uncanny and asserts that the monsters are made on the basis of their psychological state; a monster reaches a stage where he has no idea about the concept of being full rather he consumes more and more.

Melvin talks about the psychological state of an infant where he reaches a destructive point due to the sadistic destructive stage. This destructive stage is lingered on psychological suppression of a mind that Freud also talks about. This stage is a result of human aggression that results in schadenfreude and cannibalistic qualities of a monster (chp.10, pg. 181).

As it is often said that "appearances says it all", monsters are often classified as horrific or scary on the basis of their facial feature that enhance the horror on screen or in the text. Dominic also classifies monsters as the one with exaggerated features or the scary acts that evoke fear among the audiences.

Carpi talks about the features of the monsters and says that the word monster itself rapidly refers to a dreadful creature that is so scary that humans fear it. She talks about the bloodshed caused by the monsters and says that monsters also refer to the blood show which also adds to the fear evoking quality of these creatures. The visuals of displaying blood on screen is often unsettling and disturbs the audience greatly while creating fear and horror for the viewers, similarly the detailed text on the description of a gruesome murder and a horrific deed involving blood show also creates a fearful imagery of terror and confusion for the reader.

However, Carpi extend the scope of monster's actions from the acts of fear to acts that which trespasses the realms of probability and human ability. Carpi traces the origin of monsters and their connection to extraordinary which is in total contrast to the "assumed natural order of things". This designates a monster's reach beyond cultural or societal customs. Therefore, she asserts that a monster performs "humanly impossible feats" and exhibits qualities beyond human reach.

Monsters also acquire a sense of fascination by being an outsider to culture and civilization (Dominic Striani). Carpi talks of the "transgression" of the monster while agreeing with Dominic. This transgression links together both the human and cultural barriers, and thus creating newer limits beyond such barriers. Breaking such barriers is what society punishes as a "mortal sin".

Although the monster appears terrifying, it also has an element of fascination to the audience because it represents a freedom beyond one which is enjoyed by the viewer due to societal boundaries. For Cohen

the monster provides a place for the audience to delve into fantasies which they usually are not allowed to, hence creating a fascination towards the monster.

The idea of the monster changes throughout history. Mullan points out how the monster transitioned from a giant to a product of science. Later on the terrifying was related to the Gothic such as in *The Castle of Otranto*. In later work such as *Wuthering Heights* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* the horror is related to buildings which were linked to a haunting past. This gothic later gained the scientific form in *Frankenstein*.

Halberstam substantiates the argument of Mullan by stating some have “elaborate skin show” while some prioritize race, gender, sexuality, class where people can attach their own interpretations. Therefore, there is contrast between monsters of distinct centuries. It's considered that due to references to Foucault and Baudrillard, the eighteenth century is different from its predecessor and successor centuries. Literary tradition of the nineteenth century Gothic tradition is related to changes of subjectivity that Foucault describes.

With the discussion laid bare above, it can be deduced that the monster, a gigantic creature, revels in frenzy and terrorizing people. The monster is a source of fascination for humans owing to its ability to perform supernatural feats and break humanistic confines.

This paper analyzes Deena Larsen's most celebrated digital texts *Disappearing Rain* (2000) to discuss the elements Cohen categorizes all or some for a monster are enriched in the text.

### ***Statement of the Problem***

While taking Cohen's seven theses in categorizing a monster, the study intends to assert that the digital world itself may be a monster.

### **Theoretical Framework**

An accomplished American academician Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has contributed a lot to the field of Monster Studies and got a lot of fame for monster exploration. His contribution to the field of monsters talk about the reading of cultures through “monsters they engender” which he calls ‘modus legendi’ (Cohen 3). Cohen's prominent works in the field of Monster Studies are *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) and *Of Giants Sex, Monsters and the Middle Ages* (1999), *The Postcolonial Middle Ages* (2000), *Medieval Identity Machines* (2003) and *Hybridity, Identity and Monstrosity in Medieval Britain: Of Difficult Middles* (2006)”. In these works he explores monster's through different approaches like identity, age, medieval times etc.

*Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996) is his most famous work that laid the basis of Monster Studies. In this work, he considers ‘monstrous beings’ i.e. beasts, demons, freaks and fiends “as symbolic expressions of cultural unease” that pervade a society and shape its collective behavior. The work argues that our fascination for the monstrous testifies to our continued desire to explore difference and prohibition which has been explored through historical sampling of monsters (Huet).

Cohen has been acknowledged for “inaugurating” the field of Monster Studies (Mittman, Asa Simon, 4). Till now most of the work done in this field of monsters refers to Cohen's work as the backdrop as the “foundation” to analyze monsters from various perspectives and to make further claims within this domain (Musharbash 1-3). Similarly another critic calls Cohen's work “an important claim pertinent to the study of culture (Deutsch ,4)”.

### **Cohen's Seven Theses**

His seven theses significant in categorization of a monster are: “Monster's Body as a Cultural Body (Thesis I) The Monster Always Escapes (Thesis II) Monsters Being the Harbinger of Category Crisis (Thesis III) Monsters Dwelling at the Gates of Indifference (Thesis IV) Monsters as Policing the

Borders of the Possible (Thesis V) Fear of a Monster Creating a Desire (Thesis VI) and Monster Standing at the Threshold.... of Becoming (Thesis VII)”

Therefore, for this research Cohen has been chosen as the theorist for the present study as he is the pioneer in Monster Studies and this research will be based on Cohen’s thesis I Monster’s Body as a Cultural Body to make the claim of digital text Disappearing Rain as a monster in digital world.

A discussion of the thesis chosen for the study follows next.

**a. *Monster’s Body as a Cultural Body (Thesis I)***

Cohen talks about the categorization of monsters on the basis of various features and elements they are associated with. Just like a culture cannot be separated from the rituals of a society and the lives of human beings, similarly even the monsters represent the culture they embody. They assert those practices that are often reflecting a certain culture or the cultural movement of its time. He gives an example of the heart of a vampire and says that “to fix its evil to only that place where it is stuck as evidence of the cultural roots of the monster”.

Cohen says that the monster is “an embodiment of a certain cultural moment” (Cohen 4). It represents the frustration, anxiety, desire, fear and fantasy of a particular culture given at a particular time period. It is the body of the monster that points to the cultural alterity and culturally driven stakes in the monster. Monster’s job is not just to scare the people or to create fear among the audiences but it is also a representation of the problems hidden in a culture; Cohen says monsters are the answers to those cultural questions and the solution to those problems inherited by cultures, that’s why the monster is a “pure culture”.

As Cohen asserts that the monster is a cultural construct, by being a “construct” the monster offers itself for various interpretations. These interpretations are the symbolic representations of a particular time and culture as it reflects a particular time by referring to another time and the meaning it created before. It can be simplified by saying that a monster is created in one culture and is often interpreted and meaning is created through other interpretations. Cohen argues that the monsters never die, they are alive or brought to life by reflecting a certain time period or features of the culture that created it. In short, a monster is open to interpretations in every culture and monsters carry several meanings other than the culture that created it.

According to Cohen’s first thesis Monster’s Body as a Cultural Body talks about the origins of the monsters, how they are totally made up constructs of by people or their cultures in a particular time “which reveals” and “which warns”. These made up constructs also second Derrida’s work where he talks about “difference”, where one concept is understood in relation to another entity. Likewise monster refer to something that is associated with another concept or meaning to be interpreted in another culture at another place and time. Cohen says that the engendering culture is also the one that receives the monster “in another place and time”.

**Literature Review**

Monster is a Latin word “monstrum” or “monstrate” that means to show or reveal and monroe means to warn. Monsters are often called “ontological puzzles” that “demand a solution”. Noel Carroll argues that “the monster is an extraordinary creature in an ordinary world”. The monster fills the audience with fear and disgust (Weinstock). These monsters were always a part of English literature, offering a variety of creatures from headless creatures to vampires.

Monster in English literature always has its uniqueness in terms of introducing new features or powers to its readers. A research argues that originally monsters were expounded as 'inhumane' found distant from humanity. It goes back to a time when enormous, disabled monsters made it difficult to distinguish between humans and animals (Oswald). The construction of a monster can convey a message of alienation or otherness in addition to dread; Grendel from Beowulf is the earliest example of this type of

monster (Tolkien). Over the course of time, monsters in English literature were adapted or changed for use in movies, using a variety of methods to improve their portrayal. Academic discussion has been spurred by people's psychological propensity to see fiction become reality on screen.

When feelings are amplified on screen and escape the limitations of text, a synthesis of several cinematic techniques—including both visual and aural leitmotifs—creates a comprehensive effect. As a result, people try to make connections and examine their mental, physical, and emotional responses to these films (Martin). Some academics suggest that monsters have functions other than intimidation or hunting tendencies. As explained by Long, one research, for example, explores the aesthetic embellishment of monsters through musical media during the classical era. Furthermore, monsters take on symbolic importance in explaining unequal gender roles in Hollywood films, as demonstrated by a study that shows how frequently they represent masculinity in modern cultural contexts. (K.)

They also depict societal ostracization and a make-believe fancy through Hollywood's impeccable orchestration formulating a monstrous realm (Bellin). Analogous to this, Shakespeare's Caliban is another example that portrays that the fondness lies between monsters and protagonists. The research contends that the monstrosity of a monster becomes a jaded sketch of hero's humanity (McAllister).

There are various researches in digital literature which are conducted on different aspects of E-Literature, for instance some talk about E-Literature itself as the one born-digital excluding the print literature (Hayles), while others talk about the need of new media i.e. E-media as an important part of contemporary world, to cope up with the digital necessities (Jessica Pressman), a research conducted on 'hypertext' and 'hyper textuality' which leads a reader to various other parts of the text for an immersive experience as a coauthor but it is argued that hypertext alone cannot do that it needs cyber textuality which provides a lot more freedom to textual functionality in the digital text (Raine Koskima).

### ***The Gap***

Many critics have talked about the advancement of technology, its positive and negative affect on our lives. Similarly, many researchers have talked about Cohen's categorization of a monster in general or in specific how their features create horror for screen. Other angles such as cinematic techniques such as camera, lighting, sound etc. in films have been explored contributing towards meaning making. Same is the case where multimodality also has been explored separately as an important component contributing towards an immersive experience of a reader.

While the digital texts have been studied in a number of ways, some talked about the enhancement of texts using multimodality and some talked about the deliberate use of colors in the texts contributing towards meaning making etc., not much has been talked about 'digital text' itself as a monster, how it becomes a part and parcel of culture that engenders it through those attributes that Cohen assigns to a monster in his thesis. Hence this study will explore digital text itself as a monster in Larsen's selected work.

### ***Research Objectives***

- 1) To analyze *Disappearing Rain* in relation with Cohen's seven theses.
- 2) To discuss technology in the selected works as comprising the characteristics that make up a monster.
- 3) To identify the role of a digital world in the creation of a monster in *Disappearing Rain*.

### ***Research Questions***

- In what ways is the technology in the digital texts a culturally constructed monster?
- How does the technology relate to the human beings who create and occupy it in the selected texts?
- How does the digital world help in the creation of a monster in *Disappearing Rain*?

## Research Methodology

Textual analysis will be taken into account in the analysis part. Digital literature has a vast scope of the analysis of the text which is presented digitally. The researcher will follow hypertext which is presented on different hyperlinks. The researcher will keep on exploring and clicking on different hyperlinks to make out the meaning of the text. The researcher will be figuring out the monsters which are presented in the text of the *Disappearing Rain*. It will be an immersive experience on the one hand and on the other hand it will be an interactive task to explore the hyperlinks to identify monsters. The researcher looked at the Digital text using *Textual Analysis* by Catherine Belsey (Tarquin and Lucreta 1571)

The work is chosen to proclaim that a reading of the digital text is also possible and it can be explored through various angles. The reading will be a close sort of reading and the researcher will keep on switching between different hyperlinks time and again to discover monsters.

## Delimitations

Digital literature is vast as it carries a number of digital texts; short stories, digital graphic novels, poems, blogs, twitterature and so on. Every genre of digital literature is unique in its form and has a wider scope of research however, the researcher has delimited the study to Larsen's most celebrated work *Disappearing Rain* (2000) to analyze this text in the digital world making it monstrous for the reader.

## Analysis

Deena Larsen's *Disappearing Rain* written in 2000 is one of the most famous works in Digital Literature based on the web. In the field of digital fiction, it is critically viewed as one of the major contributions to digital web as it contains digital-haiku. *Disappearing Rain* involves the reader to go along the text and find the missing pieces of the puzzle to piece together and understand the plot of the story as the reader is given all the power to navigate (Alexandra, 2008). Though the work is written in a non-linear way to create confusion and surprise the reader but the way it is written hooks the reader till the end of the text. The reader keeps on jumping from one icon to another to get to know the ending of the story.

This story is an amalgamation of hyper fiction, magic realism and non-linear narrative using hypertexts, simple images and basic graphics makes *Disappearing Rain* a unique piece of digital literature. On the surface level the story appears to be simple but on the deeper level it is intricate. The plot of this story revolves around the disappearance of Anna and her family's utmost struggle to find her through various clues hidden in the text. Her family's attempt to find Anna by piecing together the pieces of the puzzle and taking the reader along is what makes it a reader-interactive story. To solve this detective story the reader is provided clues when the story unwinds, "The only trace left of Anna, a freshman at the University of California, Berkeley, is an open internet connection in the computer in her neatly furnished dorm room." While finding clues and looking for Anna, One link at a time is unfolded, the reader feels that he is equally lost so "Larsen orchestrates our own disappearance in the virtual reality of the internet (Rutberg, 2000)."

The reader is invited to join four generations of a Japanese-American family. The Japanese American family came to America in search of opportunities and a lot of desires to be fulfilled for the realization of American dreams. Ichiro and Yuki are the first generation of the Japanese American family. They found the culture and customs of America tempting with a lot of charisma involved. The Yuki's got perfectly assimilated in American culture but it seems that the American culture rejected them rather than engulfed Anna which led Amy for a thorough search. The research for Anna through disjointed clues like credit card conspiracies, ancient family truths, waterfalls that pour out of televisions, and the terrifying power of the web. The reader leads through hypertext links to relevant urls on the web for actual companies and institutions (e.g., the Sheraton Hotel, or commonly encountered web pages (e.g., "Object not found"). When these links lead to reality and increasingly turn to errors, "our search for Anna seems as elusive as the desire to track the Internet's ephemera ".

The role of the reader is essential as he also tries to piece together what is happening, both in the story and also during the decision making process, he ponders which direction or link to travel to next. In this way, the reader is made to deliberately empathize with Amy because the unfolding of the plot by the reader is similar to the way Amy must unravel what has happened to her sister. Amy's choices at different intersections in the story, such as when she decides to read Anna's letters from her computer, represent the varying choices the reader may make at any time during the story. Even though the reader has the power to navigate the full text however they please, they are not sure whether they are getting closer to Anna or further away. It seems as though instead of getting one step closer to Anna we are drifting away from the search of Anna due to the presence of multiple hyperlinks.

According to Gilmore the "human mind needs monsters" (Gilmore, 2009). Cohen asserts that in every culture and in every epoch in human history, from ancient Egypt to modern Hollywood, imaginary beings have haunted dreams and fantasies, provoking in young and old shivers of delight, thrills of terror, and endless fascination. All known folktales brim with visions of looming and ferocious monsters, often in the role as adversaries to great heroes. But while heroes have been closely studied by mythologists, monsters have been neglected, even though they are equally important as pan-human symbols and reveal similar insights into ways the mind works. In *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*, anthropologist David D. Gilmore also explores what human traits monsters represent and why they are so ubiquitous in people's imaginations and share so many features across different cultures.

Using colorful and absorbing evidence from virtually all times and places, *Monsters* is the first attempt by an anthropologist to delve into the mysterious, frightful abyss of mythical beasts and to interpret their role in the psyche and in society. After many hair-raising descriptions of monstrous beings in art, folktales, fantasy, literature, and community ritual, including such avatars as Dracula and Frankenstein, Hollywood ghouls, and extraterrestrials, Cohen identifies many common denominators and proposes some novel-interpretations.

While taking the categorization of Cohen that imaginary beings have haunted dreams that provokes terror and horror in human minds which are part and parcel of a culture, these instances can be found in *Disappearing Rain* where dreams turn the reality into imagination and the line between the imagination and reality becomes blurred. The fear is created through the technology (web) and that also refers to their psychological condition that screens create fear for the characters in this story. The screen, waterfalls and zooming in functions as a monster in the digital world.

There are instances when television and computer screen create fear for the characters in the story and make the reader fearful at the same time. When Richard watches television and during that time Kit finds the water pouring out of the T.V, she screams and shouts till she feels it was not the reality. Similarly instances are found where Kit sees Anna sitting and then drowning in these waterfalls where Richard changes channels (Deena Larsen *Disappearing Rain*, 2000). There are other instances where the terrifying power of web comes into action. While reading different letters Amy gets so confused and puzzled that she sees Anna coming out of the computer screen. She could not understand the fact if it is hallucination or reality. The reader finds it equally terrifying whether Anna is alive or dead because of these instances. These hyper texts lead to loss of track and ultimate confusion.

The Water Leavings and River Journeys, Niagara Falls, Victoria Falls, Mythic Falls as well as the title *Disappearing Rain* is equally important when the disappearance of anything creates terror and horrifies the experiencer, its connection to water or the idea of drowning into water is equally horrific. The characters in this story find Anna either sitting or drowning in these waters. These events create a fear of horror and question her existence. It seems that when Anna's assimilation or fusion in the American world gets difficult she feels choked and the American culture overpowers her as she is not able to connect with the American society and cannot fully incorporate the aura of Americanness. Anna keeps on

searching for her cultural identity and when she failed to find and accept that identity she decided to get absorb or merged with the identity of water in the form of suicide.

Hence Cohen's characterization of evil as monstrous, something that happens in a culture (lifestyle of Anna's family) to evoke fear, is also seen in this digital text. The fear and suspense is created through visual aids for the characters as well as for the readers. The connection of past with present, the role of waterfalls, the errors in hypertexts and the places where Anna is seen coming out of screens all create suspense and horror for the readers.

### **Findings/Conclusions**

From the discussion above it is found that the world is getting smaller day by day and everything is just a click away. We no longer have to head to markets and get books as everything is available to us digitally or on the digital platform. The technology on the one hand has many surprises to offer to us which is evident in the text of *Disappearing Rain*. There are a lot of stories hidden under every hyperlink, the more we click on the hyperlinks the more interesting the game of reading gets and the more we find ourselves immersed in the story. The analysis has suggested that the digital world itself is a monster and in case of the text of *Disappearing Rain* we have concluded that the screen, water falls, changing scenes, identity, fear and anxiety itself is a monster especially interlinking with the escape of Anna.

### **Significance of Study**

Digital world is itself so large and can be explored in a number of ways; this study also does the same. It explores a new and important element in digital literature i.e. monstrosity in digital text which has not been explored in the digital texts. It combines the field of digital literature with Monster Studies by referring to Cohen's categorization of a monster and gives a new dimension of research i.e. digital monstrosity or digital monsters. It opens doors for further researches as a digital text is enriched with so many aspects other than just audio visual aids. Hence it contributes to an emerging of monsters where technology digital text has been looked upon as a joint component or a mere facilitator to enhance effects but it has not been explored as a monster itself.

### **Future Recommendations**

The study is conducted from the perspective of a monster but it can be studied from multiple theoretical angles. One can take the text of *Disappearing Rain* and any other text by Deena Larsen or any other writer from the digital world and conduct a comparative study of the text to explore other perspectives.

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### **ORCID iDs**

Khadijah Waheed <sup>1</sup> <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4362-5425>

Sidra Ahmad <sup>2</sup> <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2325-0574>

Mehwish Zaidi <sup>3</sup> <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-1235-4206>



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