

WHERE HAVE ALL OUR MONSTERS GONE?: Using Philippine Lower Mythology in Children's Literature

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I often ask my students at the beginning of my Writing for Children class who their favorite storybook characters were when they were kids. The answers are usually the same and very predictable - Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, Peter Pan et. al. semester upon semester. One day, however, a student from Mindanao said that her favorite characters were the creatures her mother had told her about. These creatures, she said, lived in the forests and mountains that surrounded their town. The whole class and I perked up. What were these creatures, we all wanted to know? She told us of the *wak-wak* that came out at night to suck the fetus from pregnant sleeping mothers or the *tianak* that took the form of a cute little baby but was really an ugly dwarf. Ahh, we all nodded, we had also heard of these and many other creatures. Thus ensued an entire session of remembering and recounting of fascinating creatures long forgotten and all our very own.

In his book *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim explains the importance of monsters in fairytales and stories. He says that “the monster the child knows best and is most concerned with is the monster he feels or fears himself to be, and which also sometimes, persecutes him. By keeping this monster within the child unspoken of, hidden in his unconscious, adults prevent the child from spinning fantasies around it in the image of the fairytales he knows. Without such fantasies, the child fails to get to know his monster better, nor is he given suggestions as to how he may gain mastery over it”(120).

Monsters in children's literature therefore serve a purpose. In the United States and England, monster stories are extremely popular and enjoy brisk sales. Why then do we Filipinos tend to forget ours? What happened? Why are these creatures no longer spoken, much less written about? Are they not as fascinating as, or more so, than the creatures that British writer, J.K. Rowling, has used in her Harry Potter series that has Filipino children (and adults) reading her over and over again? Were these creatures not derived from her own British folklore and mythology?

The arrival of Ferdinand Magellan on our shores began the banishment of these creatures from our consciousness, with the Spanish priests replacing them with the creatures of the West. Instead of the *kapre*, there was the ogre; the centaur replaced the *tikbalang*; the witch replaced the *aswang*. According to Maximo D. Ramos, author of the book *The Creatures of Midnight* the Ilocano word for a viscera-sucking creature is *boroka*, from the Spanish word *bruja* which means witch (96). This is the same of *sirena* for mermaid, a term which we still use to refer to the half-fish half-human creatures that live in our seas and lakes.

The three hundred years of Spanish colonization were followed by forty years of American occupation. Like the Spanish colonizers before them, the American teachers who landed on our shores introduced us to their own culture and folklore, thus introducing us to creatures that were derived mainly from European sources, enforcing what the Spaniards had already done. Even now, we tend to mix up our *dwendes* with their dwarves. Gnomes with long pointy noses, witches and their cauldrons, elves and dragons are not alien to us. By the time we finally became an independent country, our very own culture had been subverted and would subsequently be overwhelmed by Walt Disney. Several years ago, Japanese *anime* invaded the imagination of our children. The beings of Philippine mythology have all but disappeared.

The invention of the television, although somewhat of a miracle, can also be blamed for our children no longer having any