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College Writing I

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Word Count: 1706

December 6, 2018

It's Not You, It's Me: A Beginner's Guide to Understanding the "Monstrosity" of Complex  
Literary Analysis

It's your first day of college. The first class on your schedule is College Writing I. You've always excelled in English courses so you silently think to yourself: "I'm ready to ace this class." After class, your teacher asks you to read an essay titled "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)" by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, and you immediately jump on the task. With a bright, yellow highlighter in hand, you begin dissecting the piece by highlighting anything that's unclear. However, as you reach its conclusion, you notice something strange: you've highlighted the entire essay!

Unable to recognize his historical references, we freshmen readers struggle and begin to ask questions concerning Cohen's seemingly illogical choices. Why does Cohen choose to use numerous historical references and terminology? Consequently, we freshman readers are faced with confusion and intimidation, and our inability to understand his essay makes it irrelevant to us. We freshmen readers may even criticize Cohen as being an ineffective writer and lose hope for understanding his claims. Yet, by closely analyzing Cohen's rhetorical devices such as references to history and diction, the reader can understand that Cohen's seven theses cater to an

audience of scholars in the field of cultural studies and history. He also expects his audience to be dubious of his claims, yet still composes a well-researched argument that reveals his awareness that his topic is challenging and complex.

In his essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Cohen, Dean of Humanities at Arizona State University, explores the cultural significance of monsters by “[offering] seven theses toward understanding cultures through the monsters they bear” (2). Cohen defines monsters as “disturbing hybrids” and proposes how each monster provides insight on a specific culture’s values (6). For example, “the nightmarish creature that Ridley Scott brought to life in *Alien*” is a monster because it defies “every natural law of evolution; by turns bivalve, crustacean, reptilian, and humanoid” (6). This provides cultural insight on the idea of mortality and the fear that comes with evolution and nature. Cohen finalizes his argument by saying that the monsters we create make us “reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, [and] our tolerance towards its expression” (20).

Through the introduction, Cohen establishes how his essay is intended for cultural studies scholars. In saying: “I will partially violate two of the sacred dicta of recent cultural studies,” Cohen expresses to the reader that his essay will challenge the concrete, incontestable truths of cultural studies, given that “dicta” is defined as claims which are irrefutable and concrete (3). In this context, Cohen is saying that there are two sacred rules that are significant to cultural studies. However, Cohen doesn’t explain what this means and merely states that the dicta are “the compulsion to historical specificity and the insistence that all knowledge... is local” (3). Furthermore, he neglects an explanation of this statement as well. An introduction of an essay is used by a writer to provide clarity for the correct audience, since an introduction lays out an essay’s proposal. However, stating these things in the introduction would confuse a freshman

reader rather than be clarifying, given that a freshman reader isn't his intended audience. By casually referencing cultural studies, it can be deduced that Cohen caters to an audience of cultural studies scholars who already know these rules.

While the rules he presents are "sacred," Cohen still decides to "partially violate" them (3). Given that the audience knows the dicta is "sacred," Cohen is hesitant to completely challenge the dicta. If someone believes that there's an incontestable meaning to something, it's unlikely that they'd listen to an argument that absolutely opposes their concrete understanding of the concept. Therefore, to appeal to his audience's expected knowledge of the dicta, he uses the word "partially" because he understands that his educated reader will dismiss his argument if he entirely violates the dicta (3). Thus, his diction prevents him from losing his readers' trust in him, since he makes his language more approachable for his traditional audience.

Following his conversation regarding the "sacred dicta of recent cultural studies," Cohen suggests a synonym for the word "history" in his discussion, which characterizes another quality of his intended audience (3). The main focus for Cohen's essay is to "offer seven theses toward understanding cultures through the monsters they bear" (4). Yet, what does he mean by cultures? He states that "history" is "(disguised perhaps as 'culture')" (3). The fact that Cohen is using parentheses shows that he's challenging us to equate history with culture and to understand that while they might be different words, they produce the same assumptions. Using this new definition for culture, if one were to change all the words in his introduction that say culture with the word history, the essay is extended to another audience. Now, Cohen is partially violating the dicta of "[historical] studies" and offers "seven theses toward understanding [histories] through the monsters they bear" (3-4). Since he contends the words are possibly synonymous, the same

argumentation that shows that Cohen targets an audience of cultural studies scholars applies to show that Cohen caters to historical studies scholars as well.

To further this argument, Cohen also cites three scholars without providing background information about who they are and what they've accomplished. Cohen states: "I will say only that in [historical] studies today, history (disguised perhaps as 'culture') tends to be fetishized... as a final determinant of meaning; post de Man, post Foucault, post Hayden White, one must bear in mind that history is just another text..." (3). In providing these names, a skeptical reader might ask: who are these individuals and why are they important to the essay? Firstly, de Man refers to the Belgian literary critic and historian Paul Adolph Michel Deman, who was a proponent of deconstruction, which is a form of philosophical and literary analysis. Next, Foucault was a French philosopher and historian who analyzed social control throughout history. Lastly, Hayden White was an American historian who came up with the concept of Metahistory, which is the study of the philosophy of history. All in all, after analyzing who each of these people are, it's clear that they've furthered the study of history. In citing them, Cohen is appealing to ethos. Essentially, he is showing his audience that he has done research on these scholars and therefore convinces his audience of his credibility as a history scholar. The fact that Cohen cites these scholars without any context of who they are proves that he expects his reader to be familiar with the scholars. Consequently, since these scholars made accomplishments in historical studies, it's logical that Cohen's audience must be scholars of history. While Cohen is credible, does his audience believe his argument?

In looking at the introduction's diction, one can understand that Cohen expects his audience to be skeptical of his claims. In starting his essay, Cohen chooses the word "propose" (3). The word "propose" implies that an individual is putting an idea forward, which is to be

considered by an audience. Therefore, Cohen knows that his reader will have to sleep on his proposed ideas, as a proposition prompts consideration. Furthermore, by writing that he “would like to make some grand gestures,” Cohen notifies his readers that his essay will present certain “grand” ideas (3). The fact that he’s making “grand gestures” suggests that he knows that his claims, or “gestures,” may be perceived as ambitious and therefore understands that the reader may be skeptical. He’s conceding that his ideas aren’t established as facts and that he understands if his audience disagrees with him. Yet, he asks the audience to consider them because he’s presenting a challenging argument. As a result, in highlighting his claim’s challenging quality, it’s implied that he expects to cater to a skeptical reader.

Given the skeptical reader, Cohen floods his essay with a plethora of examples, which show his awareness that his topic is complex. The fact that Cohen is disputing well established claims regarding cultural studies makes him want to cover every possible loophole in his argument. If a group of individuals are having a debate on who the most accomplished writer of the twentieth century was, each debater will provide various examples of the accomplishments of their writer of choice to prevent any counterarguments. Cohen’s argument is very similar: he is unwilling to take any risks. When referencing movies, he doesn’t just use one example. Rather, he uses “*Bram Stoker’s Dracula*,” Ridley Scott’s creature in “*Alien*,” the monster that “trampled Tokyo” in *Godzilla*, “the dinosaurs of *Jurassic Park*,” etc. (4, 5, 12). He includes multiple famous historical chronicles, such as when “King Arthur killed the ogre of Mount Saint Michael,” the “giants of *Mandeville’s Travels*,” the “Hebrew colonization of the Promised Land[,]” and the “visit of a hermaphroditic cynocephalus to the French court in [Vincent of Beauvais’] *Speculum naturale*[.]” amongst many others (4, 7, 9). This shows that his argument is complex and expansive. Thus, he fills his essay with numerous examples because he understands

that he's catering to a skeptical reader who innately will ask questions and try to find counterexamples to disprove one's argument. This is specifically relevant because the field Cohen addresses, cultural studies, is known to be interdisciplinary, meaning that it extends to several branches of knowledge. The essay sources forty-four references in total, which demonstrates how Cohen is aware that he conducts a challenging and complicated argument.

Upon first view, many freshman readers may be confused and intimidated by a complex work such as Cohen's "Monster Culture: (Seven Theses)." However, with thorough analysis of his essay, one can understand that Cohen attempts to persuade an audience of cultural studies and history scholars, which is evident through his diction and historical references. Thus, before we make another trip to the dollar store to pick up a couple more yellow highlighters, it's crucial to understand that we freshman readers may not be able to immediately understand the works we are assigned to read and analyze. Nevertheless, this teaches us that if you're dealing with a difficult text in the future, using a rhetorical approach for analysis and conducting research can help us discover the intended audience and therefore give us a better understanding of literary texts.

## Work Cited

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)." *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*,  
Ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, University of Minnesota Press, 1996, pp. 3–25.