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Something Evil (Well, Maybe Tragically Misunderstood) This Way Comes

By EDWARD ROTHSTEIN Published: July 24, 2006

We know evil when we see it, of course. And surely that was it, onstage at the Lincoln Center Festival this month, when the gray-fleshed monster Grendel explained how he was planning to devour the Queen of the Danes...

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Warner Brothers Entertainment Some works of fiction have sought to reinterpret traditional baddies, including the Wicked Witch of the West.

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Tozzer Library/Harvard University An illustration by Theodor de Bry from 1593 is included in David Frankfurter's book "Evil Incarnate." Images like this, of natives in the New World, are similar to depictions of witches in Europe.

But of course it wasn't evil, as anybody knows who even read about the opera "Grendel: Transcendence of the Great Big Bad," which Julie Taymor created with the composer Elliot Goldenthal and her co-librettist, J. D. McClatchy.

This opera would tell the "Beowulf" epic from the monster's perspective: evil would begin to make sense. It would seem, if not justified, at least understandable, and thus not evil.

As it turned out the work itself was a rumbling jumble of ideas. But it was clear enough that this evil monster was, in his childhood, sadly misunderstood by other children. He grew up lonely and dissatisfied.

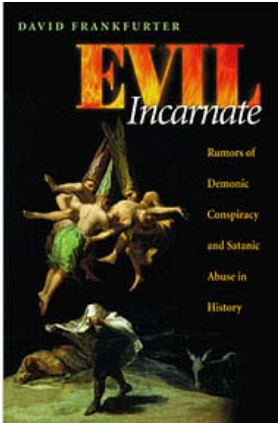
But culturally speaking his spirit has in recent years been triumphant. The Broadway musical "Wicked," for example, does something similar for Margaret Hamilton's genuinely scary Wicked Witch of the West from the movie "The Wizard of Oz," proving that she too had human feelings and legitimate gripes: the root causes of her hatred for the treacherous Glinda.

Evil is really the contested category here: if we can't find it in brutish monsters or green-skinned witches, where can it be found? Certainly not in the faces of terrorists, we are meant to think, or any other enemies for that matter.

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"Evil Incarnate" by David Frankfurter

create them. Gregory Maguire, the author of the novel on which "Wicked" was based, said he got the idea of humanizing the witch from what he thought was an excessive demonization of [Saddam Hussein](#) in the early 1990's.

Now, with more intellectual concentration but similar conclusions, the issue is taken up by David Frankfurter in "Evil Incarnate: Rumors of Demonic Conspiracy and Satanic Abuse in History" (Princeton University Press). Mr. Frankfurter, a professor of religious studies and history at the [University of New Hampshire](#), shows just how similar stories about evil have been.

From descriptions of witches' convocations, to accounts of Jews draining the blood of Christian children, to the fantastical tales of Satanic worship in nurseries and day care centers in the 1980's, to a report commissioned by the president of Kenya in the 1990's about a national cult of devil worship that was causing accidents, train wrecks and ethnic violence, evil recurs in predictably familiar form.

Evil emerges in elaborate rituals, inverting the practices of the surrounding civilization. Church worship becomes a Black Mass; the Eucharist is perverted into Jewish devouring of Christian blood; child care becomes child molestation. Each evil is also accompanied by astonishing confessions from onetime participants in the cults testifying to the evil they unleashed. There are also institutional authorities who regularly introduce the "discourse of evil," declaring war — a "crusade" — against evil's conspiratorial reach and power.

Mr. Frankfurter outlines these repeated elements with illuminating clarity and wide-ranging learning. He suggests that the "myth of evil conspiracy lies deep in culture — 'hard-wired,' as it were, to society and self."

But for Mr. Frankfurter the most decisive aspect of the myth is that it is, literally, a myth. Every single example of evil he gives turns out to be evil imagined: there is, he says, no evidence for any of it. Evil, he argues, is not something real, it is a "discourse," a "way of representing things and shaping our experience, not some force in itself."

Evil is always associated with the Other, the outsider, whose mysterious rituals or food practices are not just seen as alien; they become demonic. Finding evil in the Other is a human impulse, reflecting an effort to control "a chaotic world of misfortune, temptation, religious conflict and spiritual ambiguity." The Other is actually far more human than he seems; witness Ms. Taymor's Grendel.

When it comes to evil, Mr. Frankfurter is not agnostic; he knows. For all the repeated trauma, "there was never fire within the smoke." As for certified practitioners of Ms. Taymor's "Great Big Bad" — like [Hitler](#), perhaps, or mothers who kill their children — Mr. Frankfurter seems to suggest that by calling anyone evil, we are simply tapping into the old imagined archetypes without explaining anything.

Using the term evil, he argues, prevents us from understanding context and cause; it places something beyond the human, and that's when trouble starts. "The real atrocities of history," he says, "seem to take place *not* in the perverse ceremonies of some evil cult but rather in the course of *purging* such cults from the world. Real evil happens when people speak of evil." That is when you have purges and pogroms and massacres.

He points out the "irony" of discussing all this "when our own culture is preoccupied with the evils of terrorism," thus implicitly criticizing (as evil?) those who use the word "evil" to describe certain extreme acts of violence or cults of death.

But Mr. Frankfurter has loaded his deck with imagined evils, making rhetoric more demonic than reality. It is up to the reader to recall more palpable horrors, knowing that sometimes even "discourse" speaks the truth.

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He is right at least in that the word must be used and defended with care. Evil is not a term of explanation. It is a term of judgment. It states that some phenomena are so abhorrent they should remain beyond empathetic understanding. Of course judgments of evil have been mistaken (though I don't think they have been about Grendel or the Wicked Witch, or about some of the other forces now loose in the world). But when the word is applied to an act, we know just precisely what it means: There is no human excuse.

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