

MONSTERS OF VIRTUE

By L.J. Ritchie

Notes for Teachers by Rudy Castañeda López

In *Monsters of Virtue*, L.J. Ritchie paints a riveting picture of an alternative chapter in history lifted from the very real eugenics programme proposed in the New Zealand Parliament in 1928.

It's 1930s New Zealand; tucked away in the wild hills of Otaki, north of Wellington, is a school like no other in the country. Here the students, the most worthy in the Dominion, make their own rules, decide their own curriculum, bathe together naked and are grooming themselves to be the rulers of the nation. But this utopian idyll hides a dark, ugly secret that threatens the platonic ideal that fuels it, the students who must live it, the future of New Zealand, and ultimately our collective concept of what it means to be human.

Into this enclosed world comes 15-year-old Eve, joining the school under false pretences, to try and discover the truth behind the perfection and fervent goals of the institution and the mysterious patron who finances this government-sanctioned endeavour.

The story is told from the first person point of view, through the eyes of three students of the fictional school of Galtonia – Eve, Orion and Nyx – who all bring secrets and personal demons to their new elevated positions. Each strives to be worthy to be considered the pinnacle of human perfection. Slowly Eve comes under the spell of her fellow students, the Guardians, and their vision for the future. Will she succumb to the illusion of complete control and excellence that is promised or will she expose the rotten core under the shining lacquered surface?

This complex interweaving of stories culminates in a horrific act that changes them all and leads them ultimately to the climax of the narrative.

More than just a fanciful, pseudoscience-fiction story set in the past, *Monsters of Virtue* is a cautionary tale in a world that is still influenced by eugenic tenets in the form of restrictive or targeted contraception and abortion policies, official exclusion by race and disability in some countries, and the growing, and still open, ethical questions around human genetic engineering.

This book is appropriate as a text to study for NCEA Internal Assessments:

- **Making Meaning: Personal Reading** AS90854 (1.10), AS1106 (2.9) and AS91479 (3.8)
- **Making Meaning: Connections Across Texts** AS90852 (1.8), AS91104 (2.7) and AS91478 (3.7)

As well as External Assessment

- **Making Meaning: Genre Studies** AS90849 (1.1), AS91098 (2.1) and AS91472 (3.1)
- **Making Meaning: Written Text Studies** AS90851(1.3),AS91100 (2.3) and AS91474 (3.3)

These notes are not NCEA Level specific unless indicated. Level 1 internal assessments are about describing and explaining. Level 2 are about analysis and Level 3 are about responding critically to text. These notes focus on critical analysis of this specific text that can be modified to be applied to any level, but target Level 2 requirements most closely.

Monsters of Virtue by L.J.Ritchie

Note: If this is likely to be a text that students would choose for Achievement Standard 2.9, for which it is very suitable, the best approach may be to allow them to read the book without the benefit of close pre-teaching as a literary text.

Suggestion: Where appropriate, present the suggested formative tasks and activities using shared digital documents. Students are then able to work individually or collaboratively with other students and the teacher. They may contribute responses, add further points, offer evidence they have found in the text, analytical comments, and live links to relevant supporting material.

Reading Anticipation Activity – Individual task (1.10)

1. Based on the title, make predictions about what the novel will be about.
2. After reading each chapter, make a prediction about what will happen next. Note questions you have about something you have read in that chapter or previous chapters, perhaps using a bookmark where the relevant note and page number can be recorded.
3. After reading the whole novel, check to see how accurate or close your predictions were. How and at what point were your questions answered? What happened, or was revealed, that you did not anticipate? (Consider aspects that might reflect the writer's purpose e.g. deliberate foreshadowing.)

Suggested focus activities:

Ideas and themes

The characters in *Monsters of Virtue* wrestle with large concepts but mostly with their own development as perceived superior humans. Work with students to identify important ideas and themes embedded in the text, looking for those with universal relevance.

This is not an exhaustive list.

Idea or theme (Expand these brief ideas into a thesis statement that can be explored and argued in depth)	When and how this idea or theme is shown in the text, with evidence.	How the idea is used to comment on human nature.
<p>(Example) Personal duty – is key to understanding why the Guardians are at Galtonia.</p> <p><i>Are the Guardians motivated by a sense of personal duty to family, the Dominion and/or humanity?</i></p>	<p>[Eve] 'A year of my time for my family's wellbeing – that's the bargain I've struck.' (p.28)</p> <p>'it's my duty to the family' (p.36)</p> <p>[Ada] 'We're part of something greater than ourselves now, Evie. You and I are helping to right a great wrong, and we each have our part to play' (p.39)</p> <p>[Eel] 'Be a Guardian. Protect Galtonia.' (p.159)</p>	<p><i>Duty, sacrifice for others, involves selflessness and altruism i.e. when parents sacrifice for their children, soldiers for the nation, or an individual for the good of the species. What is worth sacrificing for? And how much is too much?</i></p>
Will v nature		
Friendship and treachery		

Fear and courage		
Overcoming odds		
Being an outsider and loneliness		
Coming of age		
Can humans be perfect? (platonic ideal)		
Good v evil		

Language features

Work with students to find examples of language features that are used throughout the novel, and consider the writer's purpose in each case. As a starting point, students may use an appropriate source to supply definitions of the different types of language features.

Explore Ritchie's use of figurative language, syntax, style, symbolism, vocabulary, etc., and find places in his novel where any of these techniques are used in combination to create effects. A collection of quotations from the novel can be found below the chart. The use of a shared document approach allows for collaboration, and once completed, the chart provides students with notes for later reference.

Example of language features working in combination to create effects. The following excerpt from the opening chapter helps us to appreciate Nyx's playful arrogance by using italics, alliteration and adjectives: 'At the dawn of time, the first men set their sights on this moment. *Let us one day be like Nyx*, they prayed. For aeons, they scraped and scabbled up the flinty slopes of progress – and progress, being the kinder face of inevitability, did provide. Here I am – Nyx – at the pinnacle of evolution, the embodiment of human perfection.'

Language feature(s)	Definition of term	Example(s) from the novel	Purpose and effect
Narrative point of view (including subjective narrator)			
Allusion			
Alliteration			
Metaphor			
Analogy			
Personification			
Simile			
Assonance			
Motif or image			
Understatement			
Emotive language			
Adjectives			
Adverbs			
Ambiguity			
Symbolism			
Jargon			
Italics			

Onomatopoeia			
Repetition			
Paradox			
Pun			
Oxymoron			
Irony			
Colloquialism			
Hyperbole			
Rhetorical question			

Work with students to discover how the writer uses more than one type of language feature to portray Nyx's, Orion's and Eve's characters, their moods, and perceptions of their world in the following excerpts:

[Nyx] Sometimes, I get these flashes. Serious as I am about this game we play, mostly it's just that – a clever game for clever players. Moments like this – staring down this abyss – I have my doubts. There are flashes of what it might cost me. (Prologue)

[Nyx and Orion] 'We're wealthy today,' I say, closing my eyes. 'But not so wealthy we can afford to be stupid...'

'Tell me I'm not weak.' His voice is barely a whisper.

'Tell me: is weakness something a person is?' I make my arms release him and take a step back. 'Or is it something a person does?' (Prologue)

[Eve] In the past, it's served me well – this need for everything to be just so. It's the same impulse that drives me to study to the wee hours, to top every test. Now, it's a burden. (Ch.1)

[Ada to Eve] 'I need you to be both the lion and the fox. I need your strength and your cunning, too. You'll be whatever kind of girl I require.' (Ch. 1)

[Eve] Her confession opened a whole world of frightening possibilities. It was like being told I could disbelieve the blue of the sky. And if it isn't like that – if God isn't that kind of certain fact – how do I know I believe? (Ch. 1)

[Eve] This scheming, sneaky side to my nature – is this what Ada saw in me? The idea of that woman spying dormant parts of me I never knew myself sends shivers across my shoulders.

I compose my best facsimile of that infuriating smile Orion has worn all morning. (Ch.2)

[Eve & Matheson] My teeth clench so firmly on my inner cheek, I'm sure I taste blood. His threat shakes me to the core, but I can't let him see it. I focus on a single, printed flower on the wall behind him.

'You're a coward,' I say.

'And you're a fool.' His moustache twists in a sneer. 'At least I know where my interests lie.' (Ch.3)

[Orion] I'm not weak, and I've proved it. Redemption is here. I kneel in the dirt and stare – only stare, with no other thought, for aeons and aeons and into infinity. In my right hand is the knife; in my left, the gruesome prize. My ears thunder with blood, and with every heartbeat, block, unblock – the world destroyed and reborn. Somewhere out there on the periphery, beyond what matters, they're wailing, screaming, shouting – it comes and goes with the hammer of my heart and loses all meaning. (Ch.9)

[Orion] They make my act the wrongest act, but in the moment it felt so true. There must have been reasons, and they must have been virtuous – because if they weren't, I don't know what to do.
You need to redeem yourself. No, no, no – I need to believe I already have. (Ch.9)

[Orion] Part of me wants to shout in indignation, but I don't – I choose belief. Her voice turns serious again. 'Swear you'll be loyal to me.'
 'I swear,' I say.
 'Swear on something important.'
 'I swear on ... on my sister.' I regret it instantly. (Ch.9)

[Orion] I stop to catch my breath. The silence stretches on, but nobody moves to fill it. *My words did this.* For a moment, none of the rest of it matters – not Nancy's swindle or that she cheated to get me here – because in this instant, I know I'm superior. (Ch.11)

[Nyx] I'm older now and wiser. I tell myself there's power in giving as much as in taking away. For a time, I managed both, but the balance has staggered, and I begin to think I'll have to choose. (Ch.17)

[Hatch to Nyx] 'Sometimes, the most valuable thing one can do is to throw a cat amongst the pigeons and see how it all plays out.' (Ch.18)

[Eve to Nyx] 'We have gifts in our nature, and nurture improves them. People like Eric want a line in the sand, and above that line is fit, and below, unfit. But who draws the line? Who decides which gifts matter and how much is enough? And why have people remain worse than they might be, only to preserve that arbitrary barrier?' (Ch.19)

Allusions are used extensively with reference to the Bible and classical myths, in names (i.e., Eve, Samson, Orion, Persephone etc.) as well as being referred to directly, for example:

[Eel] 'I've stumbled into the Garden of Eden,'

[Nyx] 'And there was an Eel in the Garden,' I say, 'and the forbidden knowledge he tempted them with would cast them out forever into the cruel world beyond.' (Prologue).

How do these allusions inform the narrative of the book?

Settings

Work with students to determine how settings, both in place and time, provide useful insights into the characters' attitudes and actions. Consider how particular settings are used to comment on an aspect of the narrative. The layout of the school is described in detail.

Place:

- Galtonia – the classrooms, baths, grounds, bush, offices, annex
- The river gorge
- Parliament

Time:

- At Galtonia

- The past at the school (1928)
- Before each student came to Galtonia
- As a candidate

Narrative point of view

Work with students to establish how the 1st person point of view (POV), which shifts three times in the text of the narrative, influences our response to the characters, events, settings and ideas in the text.

Examine the effects of the subjective narrator aspect, noting how different characters see common events from their personal perspectives.

Consider how passages of interior monologue highlight aspects of proactive and reactive action. Note the importance of reading between the lines, noting clues that prompt us to question each character's perspective and version of events.

Character	Explanation and evidence from the text	How does this relate to themes of the text?
How ____ sees herself		
How ____ thinks others see her		
What ____ hears others say about her, and what she thinks they mean		
What ____ thinks about others, their motives, and what this tells the reader about her		
How ____ would like others to see her		

Characters and relationships, and their functions

Consider how characters are used by the writer to build a plausible dialogue about what is the right course for the future of humanity. For example:

Eve

Aspects of her character:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observant • Pragmatic • Needing order, certainty • Goal oriented, finishes tasks • Enquiring • Dutiful to family, sacrifice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiencing body modesty, shame • Envious, jealous • Intelligent, quick, sharp • Ambitious • Defiant • Being a stickler for rules
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having doubts about religion • Judgemental • Daring, brave • Self-controlled • Scheming, sneaky 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curious • Unpredictable • Earnest • Attracted to martyrdom
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Group activity to develop understanding of character and writer's purpose

Select aspects of Eve's, Orion's or Nyx's character, with evidence, and suggest how the writer uses this aspect to comment on human nature.

An important aspect of character	Evidence from the text	How the writer uses this aspect to comment on one of the themes of the book

Orion

Consider:

- How does Orion's 'story telling' inform his character?
- What does Eve see in Orion – his attributes and quirks?
- What is Orion's role in the narrative?
- How does Orion's character help us to understand Eve?
- To what extent is Eve dependent on Orion?
- What leads Orion to commit a horrific act on a fellow Guardian?
- What is Orion's relationship to his sister?

Nyx

Consider:

- Why does Nyx attack Eve?
- What is her hold over Orion and how does this affect his actions?
- How does her anger, and her wavering control of it, affect her decisions and actions?
- In what key ways is Nyx different from the others?
- How does her physical strength reveal itself?
- How significant is her intelligence to her being at Galtonia? How is this different from the other Guardians?

Other characters:

Consider Eve's relationships with others, and how her interactions with these characters help us to understand her and move the narrative forward. How would you describe her relationship with:

- Ada
- Abigail
- Mum and Dad
- Tiny

- Doc
- The other Guardians

Structure

Work with students to examine how the writer has structured the novel to control the way information is revealed and disclosed to the reader. Track the decoys and clues placed by the writer to throw readers off the scent, or foreshadow later events. Note the points in the text where your predictions were realised, providing evidence from the text that informed your judgment. Note also the way the passing of time is shown.

Clue	Evidence	Comment on effect

Links to history and the contemporary world

Reading around the issues to broaden knowledge and understanding, discuss the relevance of the novel to historical reality and significant questions in the contemporary world. Again, a digital shared document gives scope for a collaborative approach to finding information and participating in discussions.

Consider:

Historical

- History of eugenics in a world context (see Timeline, pg.8) including killing of female babies in ancient Sparta, pogroms of Jews in medieval Europe, sterilization of African-Americans in the US, ethnic cleansing of Tasmanians, Native-Americans, Armenians and many other peoples
- New Zealand history including the Mental Defectives Amendment Bill of 1928
- Nazis in Germany, starting in 1933 with the Lebensborn programme for breeding the 'master race', then the ethnic cleansing of six million Jews, 220,000 Roma (Gypsies), 70,000 Germans born with birth defects, and 400 children of mixed German and African parentage; compulsory sterilization of 400,000 suffering from 'Congenital Mental Deficiency' as well as 'any person suffering from severe alcoholism'.

Contemporary

- Ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, Rwanda, Iraq and other countries
- China's one-child law
- Contraception

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- Choosing your child's gender
- Screening and abortions on grounds of perceived unsuitability or infirmity
- Sterilization

This novel invites interest in a number of bioethical issues and inquiry topics. Consider the quotation below:

'But eugenic assumptions remain today and can be heard anew in calls for the sterilisation of people with disabilities and beneficiaries, pre-birth screening for conditions such as Down Syndrome and in the development of genetic technology. Official discrimination against groups such as refugees can also be considered eugenic.

Perhaps it is time for reflection about why this flawed hypothesis continues to influence public policy.'

Dr Hilary Stace is a disability researcher and Research Fellow at Victoria University. She is the author of *Gene dreaming: New Zealanders and Eugenics* (1998) Wellington, Professional Historians' Association of New Zealand/Aotearoa

Retrieved from <http://www.nathaniel.org.nz/single-mothers-are-saints/15-bioethical-issues/bioethics-and-health-care/352-eugenics-in-new-zealand-synopsis-only>

Further Reading

- Black Sheep Podcast: Eugenics: the story of a really bad idea (<https://www.radionz.co.nz/programmes/black-sheep/story/201823436/eugenics-the-story-of-a-really-bad-idea>)
- Tony Taylor: Thomas Hunter and the Campaign Against Eugenics (http://www.nzjh.auckland.ac.nz/docs/2005/NZJH_39_2_05.pdf)
- Tess McClure: The Dark, Unknown Story of Eugenics in New Zealand (https://www.vice.com/en_nz/article/7xw9gb/the-dark-unknown-story-of-eugenics-in-new-zealand)

Fiction involving eugenics:

- Aldous Huxley: *Brave New World*
- Veronica Roth: *Divergent* trilogy
- Andrew Niccol: *Gattaca*

Gene-editing and genetic screening:

- Ken Catran: *Deepwater* trilogy and *Solar Colonies* trilogy
- Mandy Hager: *The Nature of Ash*

Fiction involving Plato and genetics:

- Bernard Beckett: *Genesis*